

## The Church – An Overview (Ecclesiology)

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**Say** Everything that we have looked at so far has been purely about relationship – relationship between the Godhead, and between God and His creation, humanity. At the same time, all this exploration and discovery has been accomplished in the context of the church. In this session, we are going to look more closely at the church, so we can understand that even the church is about relationship. And in understanding this important truth, we expect to understand church better and appreciate God's good will in instituting it.

**Ask** How would you define religion? (*answers may include: human attempts to please or reach God; the institution of the system of the Christian faith, etc.*)

Briefly around the group, share your church experiences (how long have you been coming to church, were you raised in a particular denomination, etc.) (*discuss*)

### The Church – Divinely Instituted

**Say** Religion, or the human attempt to reach God, traces all the way to the book of Genesis. There, immediately after Adam and Eve had been banished from the Garden for their sin, recognized they were naked before God and were ashamed. They attempted to cover their shame with fig leaves, which is arguably the birth of religion as they attempted to make themselves presentable to God (Genesis 3:7). Evidence of religious assemblies can be found in the Old Testament, when the people of Israel would gather together for important religious instruction (Deut. 9:10; 2 Chron. 20:5; Joel 2:16). Religious teaching was a well-established tradition in Jewish cultures, as indicated by the prevalence of rabbis (teachers) and Pharisees (experts on religious law) and other groups who divided over different interpretations of ancient Scriptures. (*read together*)

#### The Institution of the Church

When Jesus assembled those who followed Him, His actions were familiar of the religious practices of His day. However, Jesus makes it clear that He's not interested in continuing religious traditions; rather, He has come to build His church:

*Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matthew 16:13-18)*

**Ask** What stands out to you in this passage? (*discuss*)

Why do you think Jesus asked what the disciples thought about who He is? (*Understanding Jesus as the Son is foundational to the establishment of the church.*)

**Say** Jesus made it clear in this exchange with His disciples that their faith in Jesus as the Son of the Living God is the foundational cornerstone of the Church He was establishing. Jesus wasn't interested in founding a new religion or in continuing or reforming an existing one. He was instituting an assembly of people who were united in their understanding that Jesus is the Son of the Living God. (*repeat this last sentence for emphasis*)

## The Church – Divinely Commissioned

**Say** Even so, Jesus wasn't interested in just accumulating a following. He was gathering people together who were united in their understanding of who He is, so that they could join Him in the work He was doing. He knew His work would continue (and even exponentially advance) after His crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension. This explains His pre-crucifixion promise of the coming of the Holy Spirit (John 16:7-15), as well as His final command, known today as the Great Commission:

*"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matt. 28:18-20)*

**Ask** How do you explain or define the term "disciple?" (*A disciple is merely "a follower or a student"*)

Why do you think it is important for us to understand that Jesus gives this command having been given all authority in heaven and earth? (*So that we would see the weight/magnitude of the importance of this command*)

Why do you think God wants disciples of all nations? (*God loves all people, and wants everyone to know Him and have an opportunity to follow Him. The Church is God's plan to communicate His message of love and grace*)

## The Church – Divinely Empowered

**Say** Not only did God (in the person of Jesus) institute the Church and commission the Church for its work, He also is the source of the power of the Church to accomplish its purpose. The first followers of Jesus uniquely enjoyed additional time with Him after the resurrection (40 days [Acts 1:3]), but His plan was always to ascend to heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father, and to make way for the Holy Spirit to come: (*read together*)

### **The Repeated Promise of the Spirit**

*And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father, which, he said, "you heard from me; 5 for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now." 6 So when they had come together, they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" 7 He said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. 8 **But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.**" (Acts 1:4-8, emphasis added)*

### **The Arrival of the Holy Spirit & The Birth of the Church**

Ten days later, when Israel had gathered to celebrate the Holy Day Shavuot, commemorating when God gave the Law, the Holy Spirit descended upon the Christ-followers assembled together in an upper room in Jerusalem:

*When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. 5 Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. 6 And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language. 7 And they were amazed and astonished, saying, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans? 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us in his own native language?" (Acts 2:1-8)*

**Ask** What does it mean to you to receive (be filled with) the Holy Spirit's power? (*discuss - Receiving the Holy Spirit's power means you don't have to rely on your own power to do the things God has planned for you to do*)

What does it mean to you to be His witnesses in the might of His power? (*discuss – being Jesus' witness means telling others about who He is and what He has done in your life. You are filled with the powerful Holy Spirit to accomplish this work.*)

How does this assignment of being His witnesses shape or influence your understanding of the church? (*discuss – The church isn't just a place you go, but you are an assembly of people united by and gathered under God's ongoing mission of sharing Jesus with the world, beginning with your world around you.*)

## Biblical Descriptions of the Church

**Say** Based on what has been presented so far, we might be tempted to think only of the Church as an organization, created for the purpose of accomplishing spiritual labor. However, such a view falls short of all that God wants us to understand about the Church. In the Bible, the Church is explained with additional metaphors:

- *The Church is a Body.* (1 Corinthians 12:12-27)
- *The Church is a family, and Christians are the sons and daughters of God.* (2 Corinthians 6:18)
- *The Church is branches of the Vine (Jesus), under the care of the Vinedresser (The Father).* (John 15:1-5)
- *The Church is a building* (1 Corinthians 3:9) *comprised of living stones, with Jesus as the Cornerstone.*
- *The Church is the Holy Temple of the Living God* (1 Corinthians 3:16) *that grows.* (Ephesians 2:20-21)
- *The Church is a royal priesthood* (1 Peter 2:9)
- *The Church is the salt & the light of the world* (Matthew 5:13-15)

**Ask** Which of these metaphors is most encouraging or impacting to you? Why? (*discuss*)

**Say** Make no mistake, while one or more of these descriptions may be most poignant to you, each one is concurrently true along with all the others. Jesus Christ's Church is living and alive, active and powerful. It is an organization, but it is an organism. It is a family and a fellowship. It is the hope of the world with the life-giving, eternity-shaping, transformational power of the Gospel of redemption through Jesus Christ alone!

## The Location of the Church

**Say** It is estimated that there are more than 350,000 Christian churches in the United States alone, representing thousands of denominations (different autonomous branches of Christian faith). It can become quickly confusing about which church is the "right one," "the best one," or even just "a good one." The Bible speaks of the Church in the following ways<sup>1</sup>: (read)

- A gathering in a home - *Greet also the church in their house.* (Romans 16:5)
- Christians of a City - *To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints* (Romans 1:1)
- Assemblies of Christians within a particular city - *To the church of God that is in Corinth* (1 Corinthians 1:2),
- Representation of Christians in a region - *So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up.* (Acts 9:31)
- Christians united by faith in Jesus, despite being located across a larger expanse of multiple regions - *The churches of Asia send you greetings.* (1 Cor. 16:19)

Seeing the Church presented biblically helps us understand that there is not a multitude of churches, distinguished by their differences; rather, there is one Church, characterized by its unity:

*There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.*  
(Ephesians 4:4-6)

Within the universal Church, there are local congregations or assemblies where followers of Christ gather for the purpose of praise and worship, for instruction and learning, for serving and advancing the Gospel. Attending a local congregation isn't required for membership in the Church universal, but it is biblically recommended:

*And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.*  
(Hebrews 10:24-25)

Conversely, while attending a local congregation is both advisable and beneficial, attendance on its own is not salvific (that is, attending church cannot "save" a person, nor does attending "make" a person a Christian). In fact, Jesus warned against using external measures for spiritual identity:

*"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' 23 And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'* (Matthew 7:21-23)

**Ask** How do you feel knowing that, through faith in Christ alone, you are part of the universal Church? (discuss)

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<sup>1</sup> <https://bible.org/seriespage/8-ecclesiology-church>

Why do you come to church? What do you get out of it? What do you contribute to it (*discuss*)

**Say** With this question, you see that church is not just somewhere you go, it is something that you contribute to. You are part of the Body of Christ, and you have a contribution to make. The Church, and our local expression of it, is stronger with you in it!

## The Worship of the Church

**Say** So far, we've discussed how the church is an organism – a living, growing entity that God instituted to accomplish His purpose on earth of saving people from their broken relationship with Him and growing them in their relationship with Him. People began meeting together for important purposes related to God's purpose, and those assemblies became known as the Church. Today, "the Church" directs attention toward "going to church" as much as it does about *being* the Church. Yet, going to church is vital:

*You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:5)*

*We are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:15-16)*

**Ask** What in these verses do you see as important aspects of church life? (*discuss*)

In what practical ways does the church (the Body) "grow so that it builds itself up in love?" (*discuss*)

**Say** The Bible offers few specific prescriptions about what the order of specific aspects of a congregational gathering should be. At the same time, the Scriptures do offer a range of passages that provide insight to the elements of worship that are beneficial or even vital to the assembly of worshippers accomplishing the purpose for which they have congregated: (*suggestion: have different volunteers read each passage*)

*Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (Colossians 3:16)*

*These I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." (Isaiah 56:7)*

*I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, <sup>2</sup> with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, <sup>3</sup> eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. (Ephesians 4:1-3)*

*And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. 43 And awe[d] came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. 44 And all who believed were together and had all things in common. 45 And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. 46 And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and*

*generous hearts, 47 praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47)*

**Ask** What do these passages have in common? What is unique about each? (*discuss*)

In what ways do you experience these emphases of the church or purposes for the church, by your participation in the church? (*discuss*)

How is your life different and better by being involved in a church community? (*discuss*)

## The Ordinances of the Church

**Say** Even with great liberty available to congregations regarding their expressions of worship, preaching and teaching, and gathering together for prayer, two specific activities have been biblically ordained for the church to observe as periodic, normal functions of its life. **An ordinance is simply a prescribed practice.**

### Baptism

**Say** Baptism is a foundational expression of faith in Jesus. It is linked at a basic level as a obedient response to the command of Jesus:

*And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20)*

**Ask** What are some of the reasons you can think of that explain why Jesus prioritizes baptism? (*Answers may include: baptism symbolizes the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus; baptism is a public act of obedience to following Jesus, or a public demonstration of faith; baptism is personally symbolic of dying to the old life and having received spiritual rebirth through faith in Jesus.*)

**Invite** People in your group to share their own baptism memories.

**NOTE:** You may likely have people share baptism experiences of having been baptized as infants or toddlers, as part of the religious tradition of their family of origin. You may also become aware of people in your group who have not been biblically baptized. This group session is designed only to introduce baptism as a church ordinance. Point people to <https://www.whatisgrace.org/baptisms-at-grace-fellowship> for more information about baptism at Grace.

## The Lord's Supper/Communion

**Say** In addition to ordaining baptism for all of His followers, Jesus also directed His followers to periodically partake in a ceremony that commemorates the crucifixion death of Jesus. Today, that ceremony is known within the Christian Church as Communion or the Lord's Supper. It evokes the remembrances of the Lord's final meal with His Disciples, eaten together on the night before His false arrest, fraudulent prosecution, and unjust death sentence (***read these passages together***):

*While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his*

*disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." 27 Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks, he gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. 28 This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. 29 I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom." (Matthew 26:26-29)*

The Apostle Paul offers guidance in how congregations should observe the Lord's Supper:

*For I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you: The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 24 and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." 25 In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me." 26 For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26)*

**Ask** What stands out to you from these passages?

**Say:** Notice, there is not a prescription given for how frequently the Lord's Supper is to be commemorated by a congregation or a faith community. Consequently, some congregations or denominations observe Communion on a weekly basis, or every time they gather as a congregation. Other churches partake in Communion on a monthly or even quarterly occasion. What is important to remember is that it is not the frequency of communion that is as important as the commemoration of Christ's sacrifice being observed. Communion, like any recurring church practice, can become a ritual that loses its impact because we have grown so familiar with it. The opportunity for every Christian is to determine to observe the Lord's Supper as a recurring encounter with the Holy Spirit and reflect on the love of God expressed through the sacrifice of Jesus.

**Ask:** What is special or significant to you about taking part in the Lord's Supper? (*discuss*)

## Membership in the Christian Church

**Say** Our last area of focus regards the subject of membership in the Christian Church. Remember, the Bible does not offer articles of incorporation, nor is it an Home Owners' Association guide, so you won't find explicit instructions or details exactly outlining what membership should look like in the Christian Church (or in a specific congregation). Even so, the language offered in the Bible provides a clear indication of community and a shared identity as "the Church," which is understood in the context of membership. Scriptures such as **(have volunteers read these Scriptures):**

- *And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:47)*
- *You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:5)*
- *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Hebrews 13:17)*
- *If I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:15)*
- *For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one*

*body, so it is with Christ. (1 Corinthians 12:12)*

- *To equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, (Ephesians 4:12)*

**Ask** What are some themes communicated about membership that you see in these verses? (*discuss; answers may include unity, selflessness, submission to God and leaders, glorifying Jesus, spiritual focus and growth*)

**Say** Matthew 28:18-20 illustrates that the prerequisite to being part (or a member) of the Christian Church is a professed faith in Jesus. Typically, that faith is expressed publicly through baptism. Different congregations determine whether baptism is a requirement to be a member of the local congregation or even denomination. Likewise, congregations and denominations can determine if additional prerequisites are necessary for membership in their expression of the Body of Christ. Most often, these added prerequisites emphasize doctrinal priorities, or address cultural issues.

**Ask** Why would you consider becoming a member of a local congregation? What might keep you from it (*discuss*)

**Say:** While reasons for becoming a member of a congregation can vary, a great reason to consider membership is because it expresses a commitment to the local community of faith and is a demonstrable action of support for the leaders as well as their leadership. Membership identifies you as a person who is accountable to participate in the health, life, and development of the congregation toward pursuing God's mission for that congregation. It is a tangible way to express that you are "all in" in what God is doing in your church, and your enthusiastic initiative in taking part!

**Invite** People in your group to share their own membership experiences.

**NOTE:** You may encounter people with different understandings of membership at their church, or someone who might feel that church membership is unnecessary or unbiblical. This group session is designed only to introduce membership, not answer every question about it. Point people to <https://www.whatisgrace.org/getconnected> for more information about membership at Grace, including registration to the free, regularly-scheduled membership class that is required for membership at the church (and serves as the best forum to address theological or practical questions regarding membership).

**Ask:** What do you see as personal benefits or increased opportunities by being a member of your church?

*Close in prayer with and for one another, making sure to attend to the needs of your group, planning for serving together, or other details relevant to the group. Confirm your next time and location to meet.*