



CHURCH: GOD ACTS

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CHURCH: GOD ACTS

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.
EPHESIANS 5:25

On the day that Jesus died, He was crucified with two other men. All three suffered the same fate in the same way on the same day. The other men, we know nothing about. Like countless other criminals, their names are not famous, and no movement or tribute of any sort or kind has arisen in their wake.

In stark contrast, no movement of any sort or kind is as stunning as the Christian Church. From one virgin, unmarried, poor, rural peasant who died in his early thirties, a few thousand years later, Christianity is the most diverse, long-lasting, far reaching, global movement of any kind in world history with a few billion people on planet earth who confess devotion to Jesus Christ.

Napoleon Bonaparte even admitted that Jesus greatly surpassed his own conquests saying, "I know men; and I tell you that Jesus Christ is not a man. Superficial minds see a resemblance between Christ and the founders of empires, and the gods of other religions. That resemblance does not exist. There is between Christianity and whatever other religions the distance of infinity...His religion is a revelation from an intelligence which certainly is not that of man... Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and myself founded empires; but upon what foundation did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force! But Jesus Christ founded His upon love; and at this hour millions of men would die for Him."¹

The story of the Christian Church is among the most amazing in history. It proves the power of the presence of the Holy Spirit among God's people to continue the message and ministry of Christ through Christians.

HOW DID JESUS PREPARE HIS PEOPLE FOR THE COMING OF THE CHURCH?

Before a product hits the market, politician hits the campaign trail, or movie hits the screen, a great deal of advance marketing is done to let people know and prepare for what is coming. The hope is to increase awareness and excitement that translates to action.

Before His death and resurrection Jesus did something similar

DOCTRINE

announcing His plan for His Church, "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."^a Jesus' imagery is one of spiritual warfare. Satan has held people captive and surrounded them with bars to hold them in their cell. The bars are things like lies, temptations, addictions, and deceptions that keep them in bondage. The Church is to be the equivalent of a spiritual military force coming in to kick down gates and set captives free.

This offensive, on-mission kind of Church is possible only by the power of the Holy Spirit. The only way to battle the unholy spirits at work in the world is by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the Church. In the days leading up to His death, Jesus also said, "it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you...When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you."^b

Following His resurrection, just prior to his ascension back into heaven, Jesus promised the first Christians, "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."^c Jesus' promise has come true and remained true every day since. The Church has exploded on the earth from one hundred and twenty people in one nation with one language to a few billion people in a few thousand languages in countless nations. What accounts for the power of the church is not its amazing leadership, political strength, or favorable press. The only thing that can explain the power of the Church is the presence of the Spirit.

Before dying, rising, and returning to His throne over all, Jesus anticipated a question that would arise after He departed. God is holy in Heaven, and we are sinful on earth. When Jesus came down, He bridged an infinite gap that no one and nothing else could fill. However, when He returned to Heaven, would we be

^a Matt.16:18

^b John 16:7-14

^c Acts 1:8

orphaned without God's presence, and abandoned by a God like a father who walked out on his family? Jesus promised the family of God called the Church, "I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth...You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you...These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."^o

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE HOLY SPIRIT AND THE CHURCH?

Not only did Jesus come from Heaven to earth on a global rescue mission, He sent the Holy Spirit to fill the Church with His power to proclaim His message and continue His mission. From Pentecost to the present, the driving power force behind this global rescue force unleashed from Heaven is God the Holy Spirit through the Christian Church.

The historian of Christ and one of the first Christians is the medical doctor, Luke. The gospel of Luke was written to tell the history of the Spirit-filled Christ and Acts to tell the history of the Spirit-filled Christians. This insight is crucial in the same way that understanding a prequel movie is vital to fully appreciating the sequel.

Luke's work is important because the Christian Church is more than philosophy or spirituality, as our faith rests upon historical facts like Jesus' resurrection from death and the Spirit falling on the Church in power. Sir William Ramsay, a world-famous archaeologist who taught at Oxford and Aberdeen, was knighted for his service to scholarship, made an honorary member of almost every historical and archaeological association, and was awarded the Victorian Medal of the Royal Geographical Society. He began examining the writings of Dr. Luke in the New Testament with the express intent of disproving them as actual and factual history. In the end, Ramsay

^o John 14:16-17; 25-26

DOCTRINE

concluded, "Luke is a historian of the first rank...This author should be placed along with the very greatest of historians."² Dr. William Lane Craig concludes, "Given Luke's care and demonstrated reliability as well as his contact with eyewitnesses within the first generation after the events, this author is trustworthy."³

Luke opens Acts saying, "'In the first book [Luke], O Theophilus, I have dealt with all that Jesus began to do and teach, until the day when he was taken up, after he had given commands through the Holy Spirit to the apostles whom he had chosen. He presented himself alive to them after his suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God. And while staying with them he ordered them not to depart from Jerusalem, but to wait for the promise of the Father...you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now...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.' And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight."

The book of Acts is often called the Acts of the Apostles, but a better title might be the Acts of the Holy Spirit. Jesus was clear that the continuation of His message and ministry were impossible without the same Spirit who empowered Him. In this, we learn three tantamount truths:

1. God works for you. This is Jesus' life, death, burial, and resurrection for you to become a Christian.
2. God works in you. This is Jesus' life through the Holy Spirit in you growing you as a Christian to be more and more like Christ.
3. God works through you. This is Jesus' life through the Holy Spirit working through you as a member of the Church to help others become Christians.

HOW DID THE NEW COVENANT CHURCH BEGIN?

The fulfilment of Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit would come in power once He ascended back into Heaven is historically reported by Luke in Acts 2:1-7, 14-18, "When the day of Pentecost

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

arrived, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance. Now there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men from every nation under heaven. And at this sound the multitude came together, and they were bewildered, because each one was hearing them speak in his own language...But Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice and addressed them...But this is what was uttered through the prophet Joel: 'And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh...I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy. And I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below...'"

God and His family of divine beings who were present for Creation^a were also present for the Church. This is because the Church is the place between the cultures on earth and God's Kingdom of Heaven, connected by the Spirit who brings the seen and unseen realms together.

Dr. Michael Heiser has done a great deal of groundbreaking scholarly research on the unseen realm in the Bible. Regarding the Church on the day of Pentecost he says, "The first two points of the description that deserve attention are the 'violent rushing wind' and the 'divided tongues like fire.' Both are images in the Old Testament associated with God's presence—the disciples are being commissioned by God in his council like the prophets of old." He goes on to say, "The whirlwind is familiar from divine encounters of Elijah (2 Kgs 2:1, 11) and Job (Job 38:1; 40:6). Ezekiel's divine commissioning likewise has the enthroned Yahweh coming with great wind (Ezek 1:4). The whirlwind motif is often accompanied by storm imagery, which can also include fire (Isa 30:30). Having 'wind' as an element in describing God's presence makes sense given that the Hebrew word translated 'wind' can also be rendered 'spirit/Spirit' (ruach)." And, he concludes by explaining, "Ezekiel's

^a Job 38:3-7

DOCTRINE

commissioning is particularly instructive since not only does Yahweh come to him with a wind, but with the wind there is 'fire flashing' (Ezek. 1:4). Burning fire is a familiar element of divine-council throne-room scenes (e.g., Isa 6:4, 6; Dan 7:9). It is especially prominent in the appearances at Sinai (Exod 3:2; 19:18; 20:18; Isa 4:5). Fire in the Old Testament was an identifier of the presence of God, a visible manifestation of Yahweh's glory and essence. It was also a way of describing divine beings in God's service (Judges 13:20; Psalm 104:4)."⁴

The new covenant church of Jesus Christ began with the pouring out of the Spirit of God on the day of Pentecost. What happened that day "came from heaven" as the unseen realm flooded and invaded the seen realm and included "a sound like a mighty rushing wind" (Spirit of God) as "tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit."

God intended that His two families—human and divine—live and work together as one united family with the unseen and seen realms united. Sin caused humanity to rebel against God and side with Satan and demons, separating us from God and angels. Everything changed with Jesus defeating the demonic realm on the cross, reclaiming us as His people, and reconnecting human beings and divine beings as God's one family. At Pentecost the two realms and two families were reunited once again, as the divine council was present at Pentecost with the first Christians.

The wind and fire in Acts 2 signified to readers informed by divine council scenes that the gathered followers of Jesus were being commissioned by divine encounter. They were being chosen to preach the good news of Jesus' work. The fire connects them to the throne room. The tongues are emblematic of their speaking ministry. [FOOTNOTE: Ibid.]

The Church in one realm is created by the Kingdom in the other realm. The Church serves as the outpost for the Kingdom, exists to witness to the Kingdom, and is the beginning of the unveiling of God's Kingdom across all creation. Starting at Pentecost, God intended that both His families would work together through the Church until they were forever together as one united forever family upon Jesus' Second Coming.

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

The union of God's divine and human families in the unseen realm of the invisible Church and the seen realm of the visible Church includes divine leaders in addition to human leaders in local churches. We see this fact in Revelation 2-3 where each of the seven local churches is said to have an "angel" and is told, "he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." There is a lot more going on in a local church than we see with our eye, and a lot more supernatural activity than we are aware of in the unseen realm. Just because we don't see what is happening does not mean that God is not acting. All of this is overseen by Jesus who is the Head over the Church ruling over the seen realm from the unseen realm.

WHAT IS JESUS' RELATIONSHIP TO THE CHURCH?

Jesus' incarnation was in many ways a mission trip led and empowered by God the Holy Spirit.^a Jesus' cross-cultural transition from heaven was starker than any missionary has ever experienced. Jesus came down from heaven to live in the sinful culture. He participated in it fully by using a language, participating in various holidays, eating food, enjoying drink, attending parties, living under godless government, enduring religious critics, experiencing demonic attack, and befriending people. Jesus identified with its real brokenness to bring a better redemption. Still, Jesus did not condone sin, nor did he himself ever sin. Finally, Jesus sent and sends the Christian Church on His exact same mission to be missionaries in culture as he was.

In fact, the term "Christian" only appears three times in the New Testament. It was originally a pejorative term, mocking believers for trying to be a little Jesus. Since that is actually our hope, believers adopted the negative name as a positive goal and we've been called Christians ever since. To be a Christian is to, by God's grace through the Spirit's power, seek to be a little bit of Jesus in this world. Therefore, the key is to learn about Jesus so we can follow Him on mission into the world.

^a Luke 1:35, 67-79; 2:11, 25-38; 3:22; 4:14; 4:18; cf. Isa. 61:1-2

DOCTRINE

In John's Gospel alone, Jesus told us no less than thirty-nine times that he was a missionary from heaven who came to minister incarnationally in an earthly culture.^a In his magnificent high priestly prayer^b, Jesus prayed that we would become neither syncretistic liberals who sin by going too far into culture by rebelling against God, nor separatistic fundamentalists who sin by not going far enough into culture by becoming religious. There is always a tendency to become the younger brother who was unrighteous or the older brother who was self-righteous as Jesus taught in the Parable of the Prodigal and also prayed against.

Jesus commands us to live in the world like a boat in water. The boat should be in the water, but there are real problems when the water gets into the boat. Jesus' commands for us to be missionaries in culture as He was could not be clearer. In John 17:18, Jesus said, "As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world." In John 20:21, Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you."

The Gospels give us the story of the Spirit-empowered ministry of Jesus Christ so we would know who He is. Acts gives us the story of the Spirit-empowered ministry of Jesus' people, the church, who worship Jesus as God and continue His mission so we would know who we are. As the church, we follow the example of Jesus by being Spirit-filled and Spirit-led, which defines the mission of the Church. This is why Luke is careful to show that the Holy Spirit descended on both Jesus and the church, empowering the church to continue the mission of Jesus in the world.^c

As we take the gospel to the world, churches, as communities of Jesus followers, will come together. It is essential that we never forget that Jesus and Jesus alone is:

- The head of the church.^d He is supreme. He is prominent. He is preeminent.

^a John 3:34; 4:34; 5:23, 24, 30, 36, 37, 38; 6:29, 38, 39, 44, 57; 7:16, 28, 29, 33; 8:16, 18, 26, 29, 42; 9:4; 10:36; 11:42; 12:44, 45, 49; 13:20; 14:24; 15:21; 16:5; 17:3, 8, 18, 21, 23, 25; 20:21

^b John 17:15-18

^c Luke 3:21-22; Acts 2:1-4

^d Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

- The apostle who plants a church.^a There is no church that comes into existence apart from Him. Those who are caught up in the hard work of church planting must always remember that Jesus is the apostle. While we can start an organization, only He can plant a church.
- The leader who builds the church.^b Ministry leaders go to work with Him, but unless He shows up, a church will not be built.
- The Chief Shepherd who rules the church.^c The Bible is clear that all the other pastors and leaders in churches are supposed to work under His leadership following His teaching and extending His mission.
- Present with the church.^d Jesus is the one who says, “I am with you always.” In his exaltation, and through the Spirit, He is with us^e and we are in Him.^f
- The judge of the church.^g Since churches belong to Jesus, He has the authority to judge them, scatter them, close them, or whatever else He wants for whatever reasons He decides.

Jesus himself said that He is the vine and we are the branches.^h What Jesus meant is that there is no Christian life for the church apart from Him. There are many branches that we know as denominations, networks, and traditions of Christian churches. Assemblies of God, Evangelical Free, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Baptist, Foursquare, and Independent churches are each one of many branches. What keeps every church alive, healthy, growing, and fruitful is an ongoing rootedness in and connectedness to the living Jesus Christ. Seeing things as Jesus does allows us to celebrate the fruitfulness in both our branch as well as the branches of other

^a Heb. 3:1

^b Matt. 16:18

^c 1 Pet. 5:4

^d Matt. 28:18–20

^e Col. 1:27

^f John 17:21; Rom. 8:1; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:17; Phil. 3:9

^g Rev. 2:5

^h John 15:1–8

churches, since we are all the same proverbial tree.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CHURCH?

The assumption that Christians innately know what the church is has a long history. The early church debated many things, such as the Trinity and the relationship between the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ. However, one issue it did not debate was what constitutes the church. After Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, wrote "The Unity of the Church" in AD 251 until Wycliffe wrote The Church in 1378, there was no significant monograph on the church.⁵

Everything changed in the sixteenth century when the Reformation forced Protestants and Roman Catholics alike to actually define church. This led to numerous definitions and debates, which continue to this day with no widespread agreement. For example, the Evangelical Dictionary of Theology says:

"The Arnoldists emphasized poverty and identification with the masses; the Waldenses stressed literal obedience to Jesus' teachings and emphasized evangelical preaching. Roman Catholics claimed that the only true church was that over which the pope was supreme as successor of the apostle Peter. The Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin, following John Wycliffe, distinguished between the visible and invisible church, claiming that the invisible church consists of the elect only. Thus, an individual, including the pope, might be a part of the visible church but not a part of the invisible and true church."⁶

Part of the confusion is that the Greek word *ekklēsia*, which is translated "church," has a wide range of meaning.⁷ Originally, it sometimes designated any public assembly, including a full-blown riot.^a In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament), the word is translated *qāhāl*, which designates the assembly of God's people.^d So in the New Testament *ekklēsia* may signify the assembly of the Israelites.^c

^a Acts 19:32, 39, 41

^b Deut. 10:4; 23:2-3; 31:30; Ps. 22:23

^c Acts 7:38; Heb. 2:12

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

Most of the uses of the word *ekklēsia* in the New Testament designate the Christian church, both the local church^a and the universal church.^b

The English word church derives from the Greek word *kyriakon*, which means “the Lord’s.”^c Later it came to mean the Lord’s house, a church building which is not the originally biblical emphasis. The church is a family, and every family needs a house to live in. But the important thing is the family and not the house. Wayne Grudem helpfully summarizes the uses of church:

“A “house church” is called a “church” in Romans 16:5 (“greet also the church in their house”) and 1 Corinthians 16:19 (“Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord”). The church in an entire city is also called “a church” (1 Cor. 1:2, 2 Cor. 1:1 and 1 Thess. 1:1). The church in a region is referred to as a “church” in Acts 9:31: “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was built up.” Finally, the church throughout the entire world can be referred to as “the church.” Paul says, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25) and says, “God has appointed in the church first apostles, second prophets, third teachers...” (1 Cor. 12:28)...We may conclude that the group of God’s people considered at any level from local to universal may rightly be called “a church.”⁸

Various Christian traditions are prone to define the church—or their church—in an unhealthy and reductionistic manner, focusing on one primary metaphor at the expense of the full breadth of New Testament teaching. As a result, they become imbalanced in some way and therefore unhealthy. For example, the corporate church is referred to as the bride of Christ. The result of overemphasizing this metaphor is the effeminate nature of much of evangelical preaching and singing and partial explanation why grown men are the least likely people to attend church.⁹

^a Matt. 18:17; Acts 15:41; Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 4:17; 7:17; 14:33; Col. 4:15

^b Matt. 16:18; Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 12:28; 15:9; Eph. 1:22

^c 1 Cor. 11:20; Rev. 1:10

DOCTRINE

There are innumerable erroneous definitions and assumptions about what the church is. The church is not where two or more are gathered, as that is actually the minimal number of witnesses required to convict someone for a crime.^a The church is not a holy building in which spiritual meetings take place even though, like other families, the Church family often does have a physical home. The church is not a Eucharistic society through which God dispenses grace by means of the sacraments and a duly authorized and empowered hierarchy of bishops and priests operating in unbroken succession from the apostles. The church is not the moral police force of a society seeking mere behavioral change through legislation. The church is not a weekly social club where people gather to do spiritual things that they find pleasing.

Thankfully, what the church is can be found in Scripture. The book of Acts is the historical account of the early church. There, we see the New Testament church birthed through the Spirit-filled preaching of Peter's sermon at the holiday of Pentecost. Summarizing the church as described in Acts 2:42-47, we get a biblical definition of church as God meant it to be:

The local church is a community of regenerated believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. In obedience to Scripture they organize under qualified leaders, gather regularly for preaching and worship, observe the biblical sacraments of baptism and Communion, are unified by the Spirit, correct works of the flesh for holiness, and scatter to fulfill the Great Commandment and the Great Commission as missionaries to the world for God's glory and their joy.

Throughout the centuries, church leaders have characterized the church according to four marks.

1. The church is unified by the confession and shared life of Christ through the Spirit.
2. The church is holy by its Christlike character, not just by what it doesn't do through religiously obeying rules, but by actually living out new life modeled after Jesus by the Holy Spirit's power.

^aDeuteronomy 19:15; Matthew 18:15-20

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

3. The church is catholic (universal); the church and its gospel have no limits in time or space because Jesus is Lord of all people, not just a people.
4. The church is apostolic as it lives under apostolic authority, following the faith and life of the apostles given to us in the Bible.

In addition to these marks, the Reformers added the marks of:

5. pure preaching of the Word centered on Christ
6. right administration of the sacraments of baptism and communion
7. discipline or correction of works of the flesh to be replaced by the fruit of the Spirit

While good, we believe that even these seven marks are not quite sufficient to capture the thoroughness of the biblical definition of the church. They omit both the Great Commandment to love God and neighbor and the Great Commission to take the gospel to the whole world. If we follow the definition of church summarized from Acts 2, we can identify eight key characteristics of the local church. Understanding them will provide standards for planning for and evaluating health in every church.

1) The church is made up of believers born again of the Spirit.^a The Spirit dwells in them and has given them new hearts that love Jesus and a new nature that desires holiness. The church is a fellowship of true disciples who are devoted to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers^b, and to attending meetings together and fellowshiping in their homes with glad and generous hearts as the family of God.^c

There are unbelievers and outsiders who participate in the activity of the church and have an important place in the extended community. Likewise, children are welcomed into the church to be

^a Acts 2:36–41

^b Acts 2:42

^c Acts 2:46

^d 1 Cor. 14:22–25

DOCTRINE

loved and served so that they would become Christians with saving faith and later become church members. But the church itself, the body of Christ, is made up of confessing believers who are justified by faith and made new by the Spirit. The Church is a community manifesting the supernatural life of the triune God.

2) The church is organized under qualified and competent Spirit-led leadership. In Acts 2 we see them exercising their unique role of teaching the whole church^a. They led the congregation in wise decision-making about a potentially divisive problem^b. They sent Peter and John to Samaria to confirm the authenticity of the evangelistic outbreak there^c. We also see the appointment of leaders^d. In the next chapter they practice their leadership in a doctrinal dispute with the party of the Pharisees in Jerusalem. The Bible also describes leaders in the church with a myriad of terms, including ministry teams led by both men and women^e.

3) The church regularly gathers for Bible preaching and worship. The church is under the apostolic authority of Scripture. In Acts, people eagerly devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles^f, not because they had to but because their regenerated hearts wanted to. They had received the Spirit, seen remarkable miracles, and witnessed an evangelistic event that was history-altering. But they refused a simple experience-based Christianity. As disciples, they were keenly aware of their need to continually increase in their understanding of Scripture, and so they studied not just for information but also for transformation in all of their life. Therefore, the Church studies Scripture to show submission to the apostolic authority of the Word of God.

Importantly, not only is the Church to gather to hear the preaching of Scripture, but it also is to respond to God's truth and grace with worship. In the earliest days of the New Testament

^a Acts 2:42

^b Acts 6:1–6

^c Acts 8:14

^d Acts 14:23

^e Acts 6:1–6; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:1–13

^f Acts 2:42

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

church, we witness a worshiping community where believers praised God and had favor with all people^a. Worship is a response to the revelation of the Lord for who he is, what he has done, and what he will do. It consists of: (1) adoration and proclamation of the greatness of the Lord and his mighty works;^b (2) action, which is serving him by living out His character in gracious service to others in obedience to the commands of Scripture; and (3) participation in the divine life and mission^c. It is both *proskuneo*, to fall down and kiss Jesus' feet in an expression of one's allegiance to and adoration for God^d, and *latreia* or *leitourgeo*, which is ministering, or doing work and service in the world in the name of Jesus^e.

4) The church is where the biblical sacraments of baptism and communion are performed regularly as visible symbols of the gospel in the life of the Church.

5) The Church is unified by the Spirit by confessing Christ as Lord and sharing life together. The unified life of the Trinity itself is manifested among God's people who live in loving unity together as the Church. This unity comes in several concrete aspects.

oTheological unity. The leaders and members of the church must agree on what they will and will not fight over. Every local church must clarify what it considers to be primary, closed-handed doctrines. We would urge as primary for every church doctrines such as the Trinity as the only God and object of worship, the Scriptures as God's perfect Word, Jesus as fully God and man born of a virgin to live without sin before dying for our sins and physically rising for our salvation, and salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. There are also secondary, open-handed doctrines, such as musical style, mode of communion, schooling options for children, view of certain supernatural gifts, or belief in the rapture, which permit a range of beliefs providing they fall within the limits of biblical truth and are held with a humble and

^a Acts 2:47

^b Acts 2:11

^c John 17:21; 1 John 4:12-15

^d Matt. 2:11; 4:9; 8:2; 28:9; Rev. 19:10

^e Rom. 1:9; 12:1; Rev. 7:15

DOCTRINE

teachable spirit.

- oRelational unity does not necessarily mean that everyone likes one another, but it does mean that people love one another and demonstrate it by being cordial, respectful, friendly, and kind in their interpersonal interactions. To like someone is dependent upon their conduct. To love someone is dependent upon God's character. For this reason, we can love people we aren't enjoying by considering their viewpoint, finding ways to bless them, and valuing our relationship.
- oPhilosophical unity characterizes ministry methods and style. These are house rules or ministry philosophy about how the church does things, and they are in many ways the cause of a particular and primary cultural style in a church. This includes everything from one service to multiple services, owning versus renting a building, what people wear to church gatherings, style of worship music, service order, etc.
- oMissional unity concerns the objective of the church. Ideally, the goal of every Christian in the church should be to biblically glorify God in all they say and do, with the hope of seeing the nations meet God and also live to glorify him. No church ever achieves this goal perfectly, but the goal is constant progress.
- oOrganizational unity is based on how things are done in the church, such as job descriptions, performance reviews, and financial policies, so that the church can be a unified good steward of the resources God has entrusted to its oversight.

6) The church corrects works of the flesh for the fruit of the Spirit which is holiness. The heart of correction is Christlikeness. Leaders use Scripture to teach, correct, train, and equip Christians to be a holy people who continually grow in Christlikeness by the Spirit's power. When believers sin, they are supposed to confess and repent. If someone should fail to repent, fellow Christians in relationship with them should lovingly enact godly gentle correction in hopes of bringing the sinner to repentance and a reconciled relationship with God and His people.

7) The church obeys the Great Commandment to love which is also the fruit of the Spirit. God's people should live together

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

in intentional relational community to seek the well-being of one another in every way – physical, mental, spiritual, material, and emotional. This does not mean that everyone is required to be best friends with everyone else, but it does mean that people take care of each other like extended family. The people who make up the church gather regularly^a for such things as worship, learning, the sacraments, and encouragement. But even when not gathered, the church is still the church. There is a Spirit-bond of belonging and mission that unites the believers wherever they are, in the same way that a family is still a family even when Dad is at work, Mom is at the store, and the kids are at school.

Not only does Scripture command Christians and churches to love, but it also tells us whom we are to love. First, we are to love God.^b Second, we are to love our family.^c Third, we are to conduct ourselves in such an honoring and respectful way that our church leaders find it a joy to pastor us, which is a practical way of loving them.^d Fourth, we are to love fellow Christians.^e Fifth, we are to love our neighbors even if our neighbor is a difficult person.^f Sixth, we are to love strangers.^g Seventh, we are to love even our enemies.^h

8) The church obeys the Great Commission to evangelize and make disciples. The church is an evangelistic community where the gospel of Jesus is constantly made visible through its proclamation of the gospel, the witness of the members' lives, and its Spirit-empowered life of love. From the first day, "the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved"ⁱ because they took Jesus' command seriously: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses

^a Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 5:4; 11:17–20; 14:23–26; Heb.10:25

^b Matt. 6:24; 22:39

^c Eph. 5:25; 6:1–4; Titus 2:4

^d 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17

^e 1 John 3:14

^f Matt. 22:39; Luke 10:30–37; Rom. 13:9–10; Gal. 5:14; James 2:8

^g Heb. 13:2

^h Matt. 5:43–45; Luke 6:32

ⁱ Acts 2:47

DOCTRINE

in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."^a

The church is to be an evangelistic people on mission in the world, passionate to see lost people meet Jesus Christ as Savior, God, and Lord. Any church submitting to the Holy Spirit and obedient to Scripture wants fewer divorces, addictions, thefts, and abuses and knows the only way to see that happen is to make more disciples. The message of the Church is that God forgives, makes new, and makes life worth living! The Church loves people and is continually and painfully aware of the devastation that is wrought in this life and in the life to come for those who are not reconciled to God. Therefore, while not imposing religion on anyone, the church of Jesus Christ is to constantly be lovingly, humbly and persuasively proposing reconciliation with God to everyone.^b

As local churches implement these characteristics of the Church, it is vital that the distinction between principle and method be retained. These eight characteristics give us timeless biblical principles that are unchanging regardless of culture. Nevertheless, they also require church leaders to use timely biblical methods that are changing depending upon culture. This is the essence of what it means to be a missional church that contextualizes its ministry. Paul demonstrated this by not changing his doctrine or principles but often changing his methods, depending upon his audience. Paul explains missional contextualization in 1 Corinthians 9:19–23:

“For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the

^a Acts 1:8

^b Acts 13:43; 17:4, 17; 18:4; 19:4, 26; 26:1–28; 28:23–24; 2 Cor. 5:11, 20; Col. 1:28–29

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.”

Practically, this means, for example, that it is fine for churches to meet in different kinds of buildings or outside under a tree, have services that take an hour or a whole day, and sing different songs with different instrumentation (if any), as is most fitting for each one’s specific cultural context. Different churches prefer a variety of Bible translations, songs to sing, and programs to have. These are distinctions in the family of God but should not be divisions between the family of God. The only place where everyone agrees on everything is usually a cult, and in the church the love for God and commitment to closed-handed truths is the basis of our unity.

We have both given our lives to serving the church. We know the church is imperfect and led by imperfect people like us. But we are thoroughly convinced that the gospel of Jesus Christ through the ministry of the church is the hope of the world. And as these eight characteristics of the church are pursued by grace, we trust that the glory of God the Father will be made visible through lives changed by Jesus Christ through the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

WHAT ARE THE EXPRESSIONS OF THE CHURCH?

The Bible uses a number of images to help us understand what is meant by the church. Each of these images helps us understand an aspect of the Church. Furthermore, each image helps various people and people in various cultures best understand and love the church.

1. The church is an assembly or gathering, meaning a beloved people called out from the world to meet with God.^a
2. The church is God’s people who are in special relationship with Him now and forever.^b
3. The Church is the Family of Abraham, born again of the Spirit and part of a great legacy of faith.^c
4. The church is the temple of God’s presence, the place where

^a Acts 5:11, Rom. 16:5

^b Acts 15:14; Rom. 9:25-26

^c Gal. 3:29, 6:16

DOCTRINE

God uniquely chooses to be present with His people.^a

5. The church is the priesthood of believers set apart for ministry to glorify God by doing good for others.^b
6. The church is branches of Jesus the Vine, so that the power of His life-giving Spirit flows through us to bear much fruit that nourishes others.^c
7. The church is a body with many parts, which explains how we have unity and diversity when we work together.^d
8. The church is a community of the Spirit, spiritually reborn and sustained by the power and presence of the person of the Spirit.^e
9. The church is a flock with a Shepherd who protects them from wolves, feeds them, and leads them.^f
10. The church is a field planted by God to bring a harvest of righteousness to the earth.^g
11. The church is the bride of Christ deeply beloved and faithfully served by Jesus the groom.^h
12. The church is God's Family adopted by the same Father and saved by the same Big Brother.ⁱ

Part of the confusion about the church is exactly what is meant by the word. Christian theologians have long differentiated between the three aspects of what is meant when we use the term "church".

One, the church is both universal and local. Sometimes we distinguish between these two as the Church and the churches. The universal Church is all God's people in all times and places. Someone becomes a member of the universal Church by virtue of being a Christian. Local churches are smaller gatherings of the

^a 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16-18

^b 1 Peter 2:9; Rev. 1:6

^c John 15:1-17

^d Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:12-31

^e Eph. 4:1-16; 1 Cor. 12:13

^f John 10:1-21

^g 1 Cor. 3:6-9

^h Eph. 5:25; Rev. 19:7

ⁱ 1 Tim. 3:15; Gal. 6:10

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

universal church where Christians assemble as God's people. In fact, the word for church in the Greek New Testament (*ekklesia*) means "gathering," "meeting," or "assembly. Most of the New Testament is written to local churches in places like Corinth, Galatia, and Rome, often naming these locations in the opening of the letters written to the local churches.

Two, the church is both visible and invisible. Right now, there are departed saints in God's presence along with divine beings who are worshipping God as the Church. For example, in the book of Revelation, John sees into the unseen realm and witnesses angelic beings along with departed human beings gathered around Jesus' throne as the Church in the invisible unseen realm. In addition, there are Christians scattered all over the world that can be seen gathering together as the Church. In addition, there are people in the local churches who are not Christians, as well as Christians who are not in the local churches. Thankfully, God sees and knows all unlike us and "The Lord knows those who are his..."^a

Three, the church is both gathered and scattered. Just as a family is still a family whether they are all at home together for dinner, or each scattered in different directions, so it is with God's family the Church. We are the Church whether we are together or not, because wherever we go, we are still indwelt by the same Spirit, born again into God's Family by the same Son, and adopted by the same Father.

This multi-faceted view of the Church and local churches helps us understand it at both the most global and personal levels.

WHY IS PREACHING IMPORTANT FOR THE CHURCH?

God created the world through preaching. No less than ten times does Genesis 1 say, "God said". We then read seven times, "God saw" as creation was preached into existence by the sheer power of God's Word. The Church and local churches come into existence the same way - by the Word of God being unleashed through preaching to bring something out of nothing.

^a2 Tim. 2:19

DOCTRINE

In Genesis 3 we see that Satan soon showed up to preach a counterfeit message. He continues this to this day in everything from cults to entertainment and false teaching in everything from school classrooms to product advertising.

The Old Testament is a parade of prophets who were preachers of repentance from sin and faith in God. The Old Testament ends with the promise of John the Baptist coming as the preacher to prepare the way for Jesus, "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts."^a Roughly four-hundred years later, "John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.' For this is he who was spoken of by the prophet Isaiah [40:3] when he said, 'The voice of one crying in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.'"^b

Jesus' ministry included feeding the hungry, healing the sick, loving the outcast, and befriending the sinner, as well as bringing people to repentance and forgiveness. But we must never forget that Jesus' ministry began with and centered on preaching, From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."^c

When Jesus sent the Twelve on their short-term mission, he told them to preach the message of the kingdom.^d Peter's sermon was the very first activity of the church after the Spirit came upon them.^e The rest of Acts records the preaching and teaching ministry of the leaders of the church. Thus, preaching the gospel in its transforming fullness is a priority ministry of the church. God's mission is accompanied by various other ministries that support, supplement, and sustain the preaching of God's Word in truth with passion.

The Bible has good advice on how to make better decisions in books like Proverbs and other wisdom literature. The Bible also has

^a Mal. 3:1

^b Matt. 3:1-3

^c Matt. 4:17

^d Matt. 10:7

^e Acts 2:14-36

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

commands for good deeds like caring for widows, orphans, and bringing justice to the oppressed. But, the good advice and good deeds in the Bible are not the most important message – that is reserved for the good news of what God has done for us in Christ.^a The good news alone has the power to save and bring people to maturity.^b Unlike other forms of communication, preaching comes with the power of the Spirit^c and the answer to prayer.^d Preaching brings faith for hearers^e and is spiritual food to nourish people to health.^f

Paul warned that times would come when people would not tolerate preaching.^g God’s people have always viewed preaching as something to be done when the church gathers. Preaching is proclaiming with authority and passion the truth of God’s Word. In preaching, the authority of God’s Word is upheld, and God’s people are collectively led and taught according to the Scriptures. The willingness of Christians to sit under preaching is an act of worship, as they are humbly submitting to Scripture. Preaching is among the most essential ministries of a church because the authoritative preaching of Scripture informs and leads God’s people in the rest of the church’s ministries. The Bible tells us to simply “preach the word” but does not tell us exactly how this is to be done, thereby leaving some creative freedom for preachers.^h

A healthy church will always have Bible preaching. The preaching will be (1) biblical, focusing on what Scripture says; (2) theological, teaching what Scripture means; (3) memorable, practically speaking to the lives and culture of people; (4) transformational, leading to repentance, response, and spiritual maturity; (5) missional, explaining why this matters for the mission of God and the salvation of lost people; (6) Christological, showing

^a 1 Thess. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:12, 23–25; 2 Pet. 1:19–21

^b 1 Thess. 1:5

^c 1 Cor. 1:17–2:7; 2 Cor. 1:12; 2:17; 4:2; 1 Thess. 2:5

^d Eph. 6:18–20; Col. 4:3

^e 1 Cor. 2:4–5

^f 1 Pet. 2:2

^g 2 Tim. 4:3–4

^h 2 Tim. 4:2

how Jesus is the hero-savior; (7) apologetical, answering the likely objections of the hearers to remove as many barriers as possible to believing the Bible.

Faithful gospel proclamation, which began with God in Genesis, is to continue by faithful gospel preachers until the gospel is consummated in the return of Jesus, to whom all biblical preaching points.

WHAT IS BAPTISM?

Baptism and Communion are visible presentations of the gospel performed regularly by the church. Churches in every age and culture perform these special ceremonies to celebrate the transforming reality of the gospel. Christians call them sacraments because they are visible symbols of invisible spiritual realities. We believe in the supernatural real presence of Jesus in these services, which are occasions of grace he ordained for his church when the Word is spoken and made visible.

While some faithful Christians would disagree with us, we believe that water baptism is for those Christians who have already received Spirit baptism, making them part of the church.^a In water baptism, Christians are immersed in water, which identifies them with the death and burial of Jesus in their place for their sins. Coming up out of the water identifies them with the resurrection of Jesus for their salvation and new life empowered by the Holy Spirit. Altogether, baptism identifies a Christian with Jesus, the universal Church, and the local church.

When we speak of baptism, we must remember that we are talking about more than a simple rite that people undergo. As a sacrament, it is a symbol of something far bigger. Baptism is an external expression of an internal transformation. Being baptized in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit expresses the believer's death to sin, burial of the old life, and resurrection to a new kingdom life in Christ Jesus.

Jesus and the apostles commanded that all Christians be

^a Rom. 6:1-10; 1 Cor. 12:12-13; 1 Pet. 3:2. See also 1 Cor. 10:1-4; Gal. 3:27; Col. 2:12; Titus 3:5-6

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

baptized as an initial act of discipleship.^a In the book of Acts and in the early church, baptism is administered upon conversion.^b Practically speaking, we think it is best that believers be baptized immediately upon credible profession of faith in Jesus.

While virtually every Christian tradition practices baptism, there are deep disagreements on what baptism means, who should be baptized, if you must be baptized to be saved, and how baptism should be administered. We will answer these questions briefly.

1. Do I need to be baptized to be a Christian?

Salvation is a gift given to people whose faith rests in the grace of God to forgive their sins through the death and resurrection of Jesus.^c For example, when the Philippian jailer asked what was required of him to be saved, Paul did not mention baptism but rather simply said “Believe in the Lord Jesus...”^d Likewise, the thief who died on the cross next to Jesus was promised by our Lord that “... today you will be with me in paradise”, though he had not been baptized.^e Saved people should get baptized in the same way that a married person should wear a wedding ring. But, the absence of either sign pointing to a covenant relationship does not negate that relationship. An unbaptized Christian who does not wear a wedding ring is still in relationship with God and their spouse even though the outward sign of the inward commitment is not present.

2. How should baptism be conducted?

We believe that Christians should be baptized like Christ, by immersion for a number of reasons. First, the Greek word used for baptism in the New Testament means to plunge, dip, or immerse in water. In secular ancient Greek this word was used, for example, to explain such things as the sinking of ship which had been

^a Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38

^b Acts 2:38–41; 8:12, 36–38; 9:18; 10:47–48; 16:15, 33; 18:8; 19:5

^c Eph. 2:8-9

^d Acts 16:31

^e Luke 23:43

DOCTRINE

submerged in water. Curiously, even the great theologians John Calvin and Martin Luther who practiced and strenuously advocated the baptism of newborn infants agree.

Second, John the Baptizer immersed people in water.^a John also selected the Jordan River as the place for conducting his baptisms because there was “plenty of water”.^b

Third, when Jesus was baptized, He was immersed in water.^c

Fourth, Philip baptized the Ethiopian eunuch by immersion in water.^d

Fifth, baptism is the remembrance of Jesus’ burial and resurrection and therefore is best conducted with immersion.^e

Sixth, when someone who was not racially Jewish would convert to Judaism in both the Old Testament and present day, they underwent a Jewish Proselyte Baptism to show cleansing from sin. The mode of this baptism was (and is) by immersion.

3. Who should be baptized?

When Jesus was a baby, He was dedicated to the Lord by His parents. When He was older, He was then baptized by immersion in water. We believe that Christians should follow this pattern of Christ for numerous reasons.

First, John the Baptizer required that people repent of sin before they could be baptized.^f

Second, every baptism in the New Testament is preceded by repentance of sin and faith in Jesus.^g

Third, baptism is reserved solely for those people who have put on Christ.^h

^a Mark 1:5

^b John 3:23

^c Mark 1:10

^d Acts 8:34-39

^e Rom. 6:1-10, Col. 2:12

^f Matt. 3:2,6, Mark 1:4, Luke 3:3

^g Acts 2:38-41, 2:41, 8:12, 9:18-19, 10:44-48, 16:14-15 cf:40 , 16:29-36, 18:8, 19:1-7, 22:1

^h Gal. 3:27

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

Fourth, baptism shows the burial and resurrection of Jesus.^a

Fifth, the Bible does record occurrences where entire households were baptized.^b And, the Bible also records that each member of these households believed in Jesus and was saved.^c Therefore, any member of any household who repents of sin and trusts in Jesus alone for salvation should be baptized.

Sixth, both Jesus^d and His Apostles^e commanded that believing Christians be baptized. Therefore, only believing Christians should be baptized.

WHAT IS COMMUNION?

The second sacrament that constitutes the Christian church has several names. When calling it Communion, we emphasize the fellowship we have with God the Father and each other through Jesus. Calling it the Lord's Table emphasizes that we follow the example Jesus set at the Last Supper Passover meal he ate with his disciples. The name Eucharist (meaning thanksgiving) emphasizes thanksgiving and the joyful celebration of God's work for us, in us, through us, and in spite of us.

The real issue is not the name but the fourfold meaning of the sacrament itself. It is a dramatic presentation that (1) reminds us in a powerful manner of the death of Jesus Christ in our place for our sins; (2) calls Christians to put our sin to death in light of the fact that Jesus died for our sins and compels us to examine ourselves and repent of sin before partaking; (3) shows the unity of God's people around the person and work of Jesus; and (4) anticipates our participation in the marriage supper of the Lamb when His kingdom comes in its fullness.

Practically speaking, Communion is to be considered as participation in a family meal around a table rather than as a

^a Rom. 6:1-10, Col. 2:12

^b Acts 10:33 & 44-48 cf. 11:14, 16:15, 16:23, 1 Cor. 1:16

^c John 4:53, Acts 18:8, 1 Cor. 16:15

^d Matt. 28:19

^e Acts 2:38

DOCTRINE

sacrifice upon an altar. Furthermore, it should be an occasion when God's loving grace impacts us intensely so that the gospel takes deeper and deeper root in our lives. Understood biblically, grace is unmerited favor or God's goodwill^a, his helpful enablement for life and service^b, and a transformational power from the Spirit that brings blessing to us.^c Each of these aspects of God's grace is inextricably connected to the partaking of Communion.

In some ways, Communion is about a community of union around the person and work of Jesus Christ. Thousands of times throughout the Bible we read of people eating and feasting together, in addition to even more instances of eating and drinking. In some regards, all of human history can be viewed as a series of five meals.

Meal #1 – Forbidden Fruit without God (Genesis 3)

In Genesis 3, the counterfeit communion of Satan was offered to Adam and Eve. All the trouble in our world started with a meal where our first parents literally dined with the Devil.

Meal #2 – Unblemished Lamb Passover (Exodus 12)

In Exodus 12, God's people invited Him into their home at the Passover Meal. The family would gather to confess their sin and offer an unblemished lamb as a substitute to die for their sins. Then, they would eat the meal together and paint the doorway of their home with the blood of the lamb to as a witness to the world of their worship at home. This meal with God foreshadowed Jesus who is our Passover Lamb who causes the wrath of God to pass over us.^d

Meal #3 – Bread and wine Last Supper

In Luke 22, Jesus sat down to eat the Passover Meal with His disciples just before going to the cross to fulfill all that the meal symbolized and foreshadowed. Breaking with tradition since the first Passover meal, He said that the bread and wine were symbols

^a John 1:16, 17; Eph. 2:8

^b Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 15:10; 2 Cor. 9:8

^c Rom. 6:1, 14–17; 2 Cor. 6:1ff.; Eph. 1:7; 2:5–8

^d 1 Cor. 5:7

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

pointing to His broken body and shed blood.

Meal #4 – Communion meal in the early church

In 1 Corinthians 10:14-22 and 11:17-34, we read about the table fellowship of early Christians who would gather in homes to eat together as God's family. We also read how some people treated it more like a pagan feast with gluttony, selfishness, and drunkenness which elicited God's judgment.

Meal #5 – Wedding supper of the Lamb

In Revelation 19:6-9, we learn that all the trouble that began in history when we ate without God is resolved when we sit down as the Church to eat a meal with God. This shows us that sitting down to eat a meal is how we get friendship and family and explains why God has this sacrament for His people in the Church as practice for Family Dinners together forever in the Father's House.

Regarding Communion, the more you interact with Christians from different traditions and denominations the more you realize that there are four basic views about the sacrament.

- 1) Catholics teach transubstantiation where the elements of bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ so that the Mass is like an Old Testament event complete with a priest in a holy building offering a sacrifice for sinners. This explains why this sacrament is the centerpiece of the Catholic church service.
- 2) Theologian Ulrich Zwingli was a Swiss Reformer who taught that Communion was a memorial meal to remember the sacrifice of Jesus. Churches including many Baptists, Independent and Bible Churches, as well as Charismatic and Protestant churches hold versions of this teaching which explains why they take Communion less frequently than the Catholic Mass which does so every service.
- 3) German Reformer Martin Luther taught the real presence of Jesus in a supernatural and mysterious way at Communion since it was a means of God's grace. To this day, Lutherans would share in this view which explains why their services are generally preaching-centered but include Communion more frequently than those who see it as a memorial meal.

- 4) French Reformer John Calvin basically stayed out of the debates and said we should partake of Communion because the Bible commands us to as a sacrament of Jesus Christ. Doing so would include more formal times as a gathered local church, and also scattered in homes as families and small groups eating a meal together in glory to God and gladness with each other.

The sacraments are great gifts that help the church stay gospel centered. In preaching, the gospel is spoken. In sacrament, the gospel is seen. In correction, the gospel is safeguarded.

WHAT IS THE CHURCH'S GOSPEL?

The New Testament church was birthed with Peter's preaching of the gospel in Acts 2. This gospel is the means by which God's power is exercised both for and through the church. The gospel pattern of Acts 2, as well as of other Scriptures, breaks down into three aspects:

- (1) God's work for us, or what God has revealed He's done for us in Christ
- (2) God's work in us, or how the Holy Spirit changes our desires and response to God's work for us in Christ
- (3) God's work through us, or how God's work for and in us results in fruitful good works by the grace of God's Spirit to continue the ministry of Christ¹⁰

God's work for us: Revelation

Peter begins by affirming that Jesus fulfills the promises of a divine Messiah, God come among us, with miracles, signs, and wonders (v. 22). Next, Peter declares that Jesus died on the cross according to God's prophetic purpose (v. 23). Then he proceeds to emphasize the reality that God bodily raised Jesus from death in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (vv. 24–32). Peter concludes with the final acts of God exalting Jesus to the right hand of the Father and pouring out the Spirit in fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy (vv. 33–35). This revelation is of God's work for us in the life, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

God's work in us: Response

The first thing we are to do in response to God's revelation is repent based upon the work of God in us (vv. 36–38). Repentance is the Spirit-empowered acknowledgment of sin that results in a change of mind about who and what is lord in our life, what is important, and what is good and bad.^a This is followed by a change of behavior flowing out of an internal change of values. The second response is to accept the revealed message about Jesus by Spirit-empowered faith (v. 41). Faith means taking God at his word and trusting our life and eternity to the truth of his revelation. All of this is seen in the act of baptism, which is the visible expression of our connection with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus through repentance and faith (vv. 38, 41). This response of faith manifested in obedience is the result of God's work in us.

God's work through us: Results

Peter immediately announces the gift of forgiveness of our sins, which is the result of the propitiatory death of Jesus (v. 38). This gift flows into justification, or the imputed righteousness of Jesus. Peter goes on to the second gift: The Holy Spirit and the new heart and new life of Christ (v. 38). This regeneration, or the imparted righteousness of Jesus, is for living a new life as a Christian with, like, for, to, and by the living Jesus. The third gift is membership in the body of Christ, the new community of the Spirit called the church. This community is a supernatural community where God's power and generosity are seen from miracles and supernatural signs to the sharing of possessions among the community members and giving to all in need (vv. 41–47). The fourth gift is participation in the mission of the church to join God's mission to rescue the world from sin and condemnation through the gospel (v. 47). All of this is the result of God's work through us by the power of the Spirit.

Tragically, many Christians have lost the understanding of the new life of the Spirit. They do not preach or live the regeneration of believers. Rather than living out a joy-filled life flowing from their deepest desire to be like Jesus, they settle for being sinners saved by

^a Acts 26:20

DOCTRINE

grace, obligated to do all they can to keep the law of God by duty rather than by delight. Christians don't have to read the Bible, pray, or worship. Christians GET TO read the Bible, pray, and worship, which is exactly what their new nature empowered by the Spirit has as its deepest desires!

Subsequently, they have not fully enjoyed the double gift of imputed righteousness, which accompanies our justification^a, and the imparted righteousness of the indwelling Spirit, which accompanies our new heart and regeneration.^b On the cross, God did a work for us by saving us through the death of Jesus in our place for our sins; with his resurrection he conquered death, bringing us the power of his life.^c We then see at Pentecost that God does a work in us through the Holy Spirit in our hearts for regeneration. Together, both our eternity and every step along the way can be filled with hope, joy, purpose, and passion if we see the relationship between the cross and Pentecost. The regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in the heart is the source of the Christian life and Christian church and the powerful result of the gospel doing its redemptive work.

WHAT IS CHURCH HURT?

In talking about the church, we know many people, starting with Christians, who have had a painful experience with the church. The result is often a gnawing sense of guilt that they should be connected to a local body of believers, but some level of anxiety triggered by past troubles which keeps them at arm's length. As pastors and ministry leaders, we have to admit that not only have we experienced church hurt from others, but that we have also created church hurt for others. Like any family, our church family can be complicated and messy.

Christ is perfect, Christians and our churches most certainly are not. The New Testament is painfully honest about this fact, and it was written to correct churches that had problems. For starters, in Revelation 2-3 we see Jesus as Head of the Church speaking to

^a Rom. 5:18

^b Rom. 5:19

^c Eph. 1:19-20; 1 Pet. 1:3

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

seven kinds of churches.

1. The fundamentalist church: Ephesus

The fundamentalist church is typified by Ephesus. Jesus walked among this church spiritually, and the people were encouraged for serving faithfully, enduring hardship, having sound doctrine, and rejecting false teaching. Conversely, Jesus told them if they did not repent of their unloving and nonrelational Christianity, He would shut down their church.

2. The persecuted church: Smyrna

The persecuted church is typified by Smyrna. This city was the center for emperor worship. Those Christians who refused to do so were marginalized or even martyred. Jesus had no rebuke for this church and told them that though they were financially poor, they were spiritually rich and would be rewarded generously in the kingdom for suffering in a godless culture.

3. The heretical church: Pergamum

The heretical church is typified by Pergamum. Jesus encouraged them that they had not completely abandoned their faith despite suffering both physically and spiritually. In their city, Satan sought to establish the headquarters of his demonic counterfeit kingdom and the place "where Satan's throne is" (Rev. 2:13). However, they were rebuked for allowing false-teaching wolves into their church who encouraged sexual sin and syncretism (living culture up instead of Kingdom down).

4. The liberal church: Thyatira

The liberal church is typified by Thyatira. This church was encouraged for its social justice work of helping those in need, being kind and relational, and having a growing ministry. On the other hand, it was rebuked for also tolerating sin (especially sexual sin) and demonic false teaching from a false prophet and false prophetess, which brought suffering upon the church. The liberal church has some good deeds for the community but has a lot of bad deeds in personal morality and spirituality that opens the door to demonic deception.

DOCTRINE

5. The dead church: Sardis

The dead church is typified by Sardis. Jesus had nothing good to say about this church, as it was godless, dead, and no longer experiencing the life of the Spirit. Jesus said the people looked alive on the outside but were spiritually dead, and they must repent quickly or experience the death of their church and be sentenced to hell for eternity. Sadly, there are a lot of dead churches that are still open on Sunday but not open to the Spirit.

6. The faithful church: Philadelphia

The faithful church is typified by Philadelphia, a wealthy city known for its wine and its chief deity Dionysius, the demon god of wine and debauchery. Despite enormous cultural and spiritual pressure to indulge in every excess, the church did not give in to the demonic seduction to sin. Jesus only had good things to say to this church, as the people had endured hardship and been publicly slandered yet remained godly and patient.

7. The lukewarm church: Laodicea

The lukewarm church is typified by Laodicea. This was an arrogant and affluent city built on a high place. They literally and figuratively looked down on everyone else. Jesus had nothing good to say about this church, which was little more than a comfortable place for rich people to gather. Jesus said their doors were basically locked and that even He had not been welcomed into their godless country club.

There are churches on the spectrum from amazing to abysmal. There are Christians in every church who are on that same spectrum. Which kind of church do you attend? Which kind of Christian are you? If we are going to be honest about churches, we need to also be honest about ourselves as Christians.

Adding to the problem of church hurt is the fact that what God creates, Satan counterfeits. One church, for example, was told, "the work of Satan...counterfeit power and signs and miracles. He will use every kind of evil deception..." If Satan sought to undermine

° 2 Thess. 2:9-10 (NLT)

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

and overthrow God's Kingdom in Heaven, and tried again with Jesus ministry through Judas, we should assume that he also has a plan to attack our local churches. The Bible warns us over and over against these counterfeits:

1. False Apostles – 2 Corinthians 11:13-15; Revelation 2:2-5
2. False Prophets – Ezekiel 13:8-9; Matthew 7:15
3. False Teachers – 2 Peter 2:1-9
4. False Doctrines – 1 Timothy 4:1-2; Galatians 1:8, 3:1
5. False Brothers – 2 Corinthians 11:26; Galatians 2:4
6. False Elders – Acts 20:17-38

The truth is, sometimes, the people or teachings in a church that hurt us were not even Christian. Just like Judas was in Jesus' ministry, but was not a believer, Satan uses this same tactic to cause as much harm as possible and have people confused thinking that it was done by God or God's people. The result is division, which is demonic, that undermines unity, which is godly. Writing to the church about people sent by Satan into the church to cause division, Paul closes his letter to the Roman church warning, "watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them. For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ...I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you."^a

What Satan hopes to do to you through church hurt is threefold.

One, he wants you to allow your hurt to become bitterness through unforgiveness. Since forgiveness invites heaven down into your life, and bitterness pulls hell up into your life, Satan hopes that you will become bitter against God, other Christians, and the church so that he can then recruit you in his war against God just as he did the angels who are now demons. He will even seek to convince you that your war against the church is for the Lord, which is part of his demonic deception.

Jesus' heart for and commitment to the church should compel us to love and serve the church. In Ephesians 5:25 Paul says, "Christ

^aRom. 16:17-20

DOCTRINE

loved the church and gave himself up for her.” The context in which Paul speaks is marriage, and without overstating the analogy he is saying that the church is like Jesus’ bride, whom he loves and serves despite all her faults and flaws. Those who ignore the church, criticize the church, despise the church, or even harm the church must seriously question whether they truly love Jesus and are his followers, since true Christians love and serve the church because Jesus does. To love Jesus and hate or even attack the church is like telling a husband that you want to be his close friend even though you hate his wife and will occasionally assault her.

Two, he wants to isolate you so that you are no longer close with fellow Christians. The reason justifying this isolation is that since you were hurt, you cannot heal, and relationships with Christians cannot be healthy. When the Bible first said it was not good for us to be alone, that was before sin even entered the world, and in a fallen world to be alone is to be in harm’s way. Jesus is a Shepherd who wants you to be part of a flock, and Satan is a wolf who wants you to wander off from a flock so he can destroy you.

Being a Christian means being a Jesus follower, a disciple. His call to “follow me” means joining a group of disciples who, together, are the people of God. The New Testament uses collective metaphors to describe the church of Christ. They include flock, temple, body, and family or household.^o Each of the images communicates the same big idea that God’s people are to remain together. Sheep die individually but live as a flock, fed and protected by a shepherd; a building falls down if too many bricks are removed; limbs die if removed from the body; a family is destroyed if its members do not live in love together.

Three, the demonic counterfeit of a covenant with God is an inner vow with self. Rather than entering into a covenant relationship with God’s family the church, Satan wants you to make an inner vow with yourself that you will never again trust or participate in God’s family ever again. He will even bring along other hurt people

^o John 10:11–16; Acts 20:28–29; 1 Pet. 5:2–3. 1 Cor. 3:16–17; Eph. 2:21. Rom. 12:4–5; 1 Cor. 10:17; 12:12–30; Eph. 4:15–16. Gal. 6:10; Eph. 2:19; 1 Pet. 4:17. Eph. 2:19–22; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 2:5

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

with the same bitterness and inner vow to justify and reinforce your decisions which cause your destructions.

We love God. We love you. And we love the church. Every Christian has varying degrees and kinds of church hurt. The New Testament letters written to churches include incredible religious legalism where people are attacking each other like wild dogs in Galatia, and rebellious licentiousness where people are getting drunk at communion and sleeping with even family members in Corinth. The New Testament was written to local churches that were hospitals filled with sick people needing a lot of help and nothing has changed in our day.

Despite all the pains and problems in the churches, the New Testament tells us how to make it better. Over and over, the phrase "one another" is used in some form or fashion. These commands in the Bible cannot be obeyed unless you are part of a local church family as they were written to churches to be read in churches and obeyed by people in those churches:

Romans

12:5	Belong to one another
12:10	Be devoted to one another
12:10	Honor one another
12:16	Live in harmony with one another
12:18	Live at peace with one another
15:7	Accept one another

1 Corinthians

1:10	Agree with one another
4:6	Don't take pride over against one another
10:24	Look out for one another
12:25	Have equal concern for one another
16:20	Greet one another with a holy kiss

Galatians

5:13	Serve one another
5:15	Don't devour one another
5:26	Don't envy one another
5:26	Don't provoke one another
6:1	Carry one another's burdens

DOCTRINE

Ephesians

4:2 Bear with one another
4:25 Speak truthfully with one another
4:32 Be kind to one another
4:32 Be compassionate to one another
4:32 Forgive one another
5:19 Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs
5:21 Submit to one another

Philippians

2:4 Look to the interests of one another

Colossians

3:9 Don't lie to one another
3:13 Bear with one another
3:13 Forgive one another
3:16 Teach one another
3:16 Admonish one another

1 Thessalonians

4:9 Love one another
4:18 Encourage one another
5:11 Encourage one another
5:11 Build up one another
5:13 Live in peace with one another
5:15 Be kind to one another

Hebrews

10:24 Spur on one another
10:25 Meet with one another
10:25 Encourage one another
13:1 Love one another

James

5:9 Don't grumble against one another
5:16 Confess your sins to one another
5:16 Pray for one another

1 Peter

1:22 Love one another
3:8 Live in harmony with one another
4:9 Offer hospitality to one another
5:14 Greet one another with a kiss of love

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

1 John

- 1:7 Have fellowship with one another
3:11 Love one another
3:16 Lay down your lives for one another
3:23 Love one another
4:7 Love one another

2 John

- 5 Love one another

The church needs you, and you need the church. We would encourage you to forgive whatever church hurt you have, find a group of godly people you can trust to do life with you, and commit yourself to that local church like a family with all of its faults and flaws but love and serve because that's what family is all about. There's no such thing as a perfect family or church family, but both become better if we become part of the solution rather than just pointing out the problems.

Lastly, Christians in the church are told, "let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 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."^a Being together is how we stir one another up to be more loving and helpful. Think of it like a fire. When the logs are stacked together, they radiate heat and life to one another to burn brighter and longer. When those same logs are separated and scattered, they quickly stop burning, grow dim, and eventually smolder out altogether. Christians are like those logs.

^aHeb. 10:24-25

DOCTRINE

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL JOURNALING AND/OR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What is your most memorable church experience?
2. What areas is your church strong in that you can thank God for? What areas in your local church are weak and could benefit from your prayer and help?
3. What are some of the most influential church leaders and sermons that God has used to bless you?
4. Is there anything more you could be doing to encourage unity in your local church?
5. Which non-Christians do you need to be praying for and inviting to church?
6. What do you most appreciate about your Christian friends from other teams, tribes, and traditions?
7. What top three changes have you seen in your life by the power of the Holy Spirit?
8. Have you been baptized? Why or why not?

NOTES

CHURCH: GOD ACTS

1. Bonaparte, Napoleon. At St. Helena, to Count de Motholon. Major General Alfred Pleasonton. Stephen Abbott Northrop, D.D., *A Cloud of Witnesses* (Portland OR: American Heritage Ministries, 1987; Mantle Ministries, 228 Still Ridge, Bulverde, Texas), pp. 361–362. Vernon C. Grounds, *The Reason for Our Hope* (Chicago: Moody Press), p. 37. Willard Cantelon, *New Money or None?* (Plainfield, NJ: Logos International, 1979), p. 246. Quoted from William J. Federer, *Great Quotations: A Collection of Passages, Phrases, and Quotations Influencing Early and Modern World History Referenced according to Their Sources in Literature, Memoirs, Letters, Governmental Documents, Speeches, Charters, Court Decisions and Constitutions* (St. Louis, MO: AmeriSearch, 2001).
2. William M. Ramsay, *The Bearing of Recent Discovery on the Trustworthiness of the New Testament* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 222.
3. William Lane Craig, “Rediscovering the Historical Jesus: The Evidence for Jesus,” *Faith and Mission* 15, no. 2 (1998): 20.
4. Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 297.
5. T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 266.
6. R. L. Omonson, “The Church,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 231.
7. *Ibid.*
8. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 857.
9. This is what David Murrow speaks of in his book *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004).
10. These three organizational points are adapted from Steve Walker, pastor of Redeemer’s Fellowship, Roseburg, OR. The same basic outline can be seen in Luke 24:46–47; Acts 10:39–43; 13:26–39; Rom. 4:22–25; and 1 Cor. 15:1–8.

MARK DRISCOLL

With Pastor Mark, it's all about Jesus! Mark and his wife Grace have been married and doing ministry together for over twenty-five years. They also planted The Trinity Church with their five kids in Scottsdale, Arizona as a family ministry (thetrinitychurch.com) and started Real Faith, a ministry alongside their daughter Ashley that contains a mountain of Bible teaching from Pastor Mark as well as content for women, men, pastors, leaders, Spanish-speakers, and more.

Mark has been named by Preaching Magazine one of the twenty-five most influential pastors of the past twenty-five years. He has a bachelor's degree in speech communication from the Edward R. Murrow College of Communication at Washington State University as well as a master's degree in exegetical theology from Western Seminary in Portland, Oregon. For free sermons, answers to questions, Bible teaching, and more, visit **RealFaith.com** or download the **Real Faith app**.

Together, Mark and Grace have authored "Win Your War" and "Real Marriage". Pastor Mark has authored numerous other books including "Spirit-Filled Jesus", "Who Do You Think You Are?", "Vintage Jesus", and "Doctrine".

