

Title: "I Believe In The Church"
February 27, 2022,

Text: Ephesians 2:17-20
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Early this year, I received a book in the mail titled *Rediscover Church*. It was being widely promoted by many trusted sources to pastors and church leaders and Christians, in general, to speak to a pressing issue in the present time. In the opening pages, it says this,

"A Christian without a church is a Christian in trouble."

Since a global pandemic abruptly closed places of worship, many Christians have skipped church life, even neglecting virtual services. But this was a trend even before COVID-19. Polarizing issues, including political and racial strife, convinced some people to pull away from the church and one another. Now it's time to recommit to gathering as brothers and sisters in Christ.

In *Rediscover Church*, Collin Hansen and Jonathan Leeman discuss why church is essential for believers and God's mission. Through biblical references and personal stories, they show readers God's true intention for corporate gathering: to spiritually strengthen members as individuals and the body of Christ. In an age of church-shopping and live-streamed services, rediscover why the future of the church relies on believers gathering regularly as the family of God.¹

This morning we're going to look at a passage that, if we hear it, can give us a fresh perspective on the church and our role in the church. Now, on many Sundays, we confess our faith together using the words of the Apostles' Creed. There is a part where we say we believe in the *Holy Catholic Church*. This passage in Ephesians 2 can help us gain a deeper understanding of and appreciation for what that means.

Now, briefly, Ephesians is one of the prison epistles, together with Philippians and Colossians and Philemon. It was written during Paul's extended imprisonment in Rome. Of the four prison epistles, three of them were written to churches. This, among other things, shows us the

importance of the church. Even when Paul was suffering and held a prisoner, he so valued the churches that he wrote to strengthen them. So, with the Apostles' Creed as a backdrop, let's come to this passage and ask two questions *1. What is the holy catholic church? 2. What does it mean to believe in the holy catholic church?*

First,

I. WHAT IS THE HOLY CATHOLIC CHURCH?

A. Let's think about these words. Do we understand them?

1. To be "holy" means to be set apart for God. It is related to the words sanctified, saints, consecrated - it means set apart for God.

2. The word "catholic" means universal. That is widely misunderstood because most people think of the Roman Catholic Church. But the word itself is from Latin. It simply means universal. So the words: *holy catholic church*, describe a community of people, which is universal, in the sense that it includes all people at all times and in all places, who have been set apart as holy for God.

3. The word "church" is all through the book of Ephesians. In the first chapter (1:22-23), Paul says that God gave Christ *as head over all things to the church, 23 which is his body*. In the third chapter, he concludes a prayer with the words: *to him (God) be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.* The whole book of Ephesians is about the church even when the word "church" isn't used, but when it is used, it is translating the Greek word *ekklesia*. That is a compound word. It combines the word "out" "Ek" with the word "to call," "kaleo." An "ekklesia" is a body of people who have been called out of the world at large for a purpose.

B. Can you see all of this reflected here in Ephesians 2:17-19?

And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. - It is a called-out people - 18 For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father - It is universal -. 19 So

then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints - it is holy - and members of the household of God.

It is important to understand this. It is also important to understand that
the universal church is embodied in local churches like ours.

1. Paul wrote this letter to the church at Ephesus. This is one of the themes in this new era that began after the resurrection of Jesus and continued in Acts and now in the inspired Scriptures of the New Testament. The emphasis in the epistles is on the universal church embodied in a particular place and with a particular group of people. Paul tells the people in the church at Ephesus to be kind, tenderhearted, and forgiving with each other (4:32). He tells them the whole body grows and builds itself up in love as each part does its work (4:16). You have to be rubbing shoulders with each other for that to be meaningful. So it's talking about a gathered people, a particular church fellowship. Scripture moves effortlessly from talking about the universal church to the particular expression of it with a group of people like the church at Ephesus or Christ Community.

2. Now, here's a question: How do you think the word "church" is used most often in the Bible? In the majority of instances, it is used of a local church like ours. The church *is* universal: it is made up of all true Christians in all places and at all times, but it is called by God to take shape in the world in the form of particular local churches, like ours. Here's where we should consider the meaning of the word church. *Ekklesia* means an assembly, a called-out gathering. But think about that: the name itself describes an assembly, a gathering together of people. So that name in itself emphasizes the truth that we are called to actually gather, to assemble. In the book *Rediscover Church*, the authors write,

Sometimes people like to say that "a church is a people, not a place." It's slightly more accurate to say a church is a people assembled in a place. Regularly assembling or gathering makes a church a church. This doesn't mean a church stops being a church when the people aren't gathered, any more than a soccer team

stops being a “team” when the members aren’t playing. The point is regularly gathering together is necessary for a church to be a church, just like a team has to gather to play in order to be a team.

God established and ordained the Christian faith this way. He wants us to establish as part of our life of following Jesus a rhythm of gathering together not just occasionally but consistently, in a committed relationship to other Christians in which we learn, worship, serve and care for each other and the cause of Christ together. That is why the author of Hebrews, in **Hebrews 10:24-25**, writes, *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.* Gathering together in person is important.

We’ve been trying to reach out to any members and regular attenders here at Christ Community whom we haven’t seen consistently in the last two years of the pandemic. We sent out over a hundred emails asking 1st how we might care for them and 2nd when they might return to worship with us. Of those who responded, some have shared very understandable reasons they have not returned for in-person worship. A good number expressed sincere gratitude for the Livestream, and many of them also expressed a desire to return to in-person worship soon. But 2/3^{rds} have not responded at all. And some we have heard back from have let us know they have just gotten out of the habit, and it’s been inconvenient to return. While we as a church want to respect individual Christian conscience and support those in circumstances that call for caution, we also want to be clear that in-person worship and community are critical for a healthy Christianity. The church was never meant to be something we participate in digitally or virtually or inconsistently and indifferently. I’m hopeful about some good news I saw on Friday. The Center for Disease Control has issued new guidelines and made sweeping changes in their former recommendations. One major change was that those who are healthy and live in counties with low or medium risk levels of covid are no longer being encouraged or urged to feel the need to wear masks indoors. Our county, Volusia, is in a low to medium risk category

according to the CDC, so the CDC is dropping the recommendation that masks should be worn in indoor settings. I hope that will give some of our people who have been waiting for that kind of reassurance to move toward making a choice to return to in-person worship soon. The church is a community of people called out of the world to actually gather together for worship, learning, community, service, and mission.

So here's the second question:

II. WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BELIEVE IN THE CHURCH?

If I say I don't believe in God, that means I don't believe God exists. But to say I don't believe in the church doesn't mean I don't believe it exists. It has to mean; I don't believe the church is what the Bible says it is. So flip that. To believe in the holy catholic church means not just that you believe that it exists, but you believe it is what God says it is.

A. To believe in the church means to see the church as God sees the church.

Look how this passage gives us multiple images or pictures of the church because it wants us to see the church the way God sees it.

1. *The church is a kingdom.* Verse 19 says, *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints.* Christ is our king, and all the members were formally strangers and aliens, but we are all now citizens. In the ancient world, if you were not a citizen, you really had no rights or protections. There is a place in Acts where Paul is grabbed by a mob. They are about to beat him, and he says, "I'm a citizen of Rome ."And it's amazing. Everyone backs up and backs off. "Oh, okay, then there has to be a trail ."This man is backed up by the emperor and full power of Rome. *The church is a kingdom you enter through faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior.*

What other images are we given?

2. *The church is a family.* Verse 19 goes on to say, *and members of the household of God.* God is the Father, and we have access to the father in the Spirit. Because of Jesus, we share his nature, and we are

his family. This is why in Ephesians 4:1-6, we're told to guard and maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. No pandemic or election should threaten this family unity. When controversy hits, the church community should draw together in love and empathy. Our ability to withstand worldly divisions should be a testimony to our devotion to God.

There's a third image:

3. The church is a temple. Verse 20 says, *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. 22 In him, you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.* The foundation is the apostles and prophets. They gave us the Scriptures. The cornerstone is Jesus. He died in our place for our sins and rose again as our Savior. You just turn to Him and trust in him, and he saves your soul. He gives you eternal life. We are saved through faith in Jesus. So, he is the one who holds us all together and shapes us as his church. When God says His Spirit dwells in us, he is saying, *"I will personally manifest my presence in your midst. I will be there speaking to you, guiding you, leading you, strengthening you. I will show you your sins, and I will assure you of my love. I will be present in your midst to minister to your needs"*. To believe in the church is to believe this!

In the Bible, God is constantly asking us to see by faith a different reality than that which is perceived by the naked eye. This church, this community of believers, is a holy place because when we gather here, God is present with us and in us; the children we smile at, the old friends that greet us in the lobby, and the new friends we meet every Sunday, they are *living stones, ...being built into a spiritual house* for God. God wants you to see the church as he sees it.

Illustration: There is a very creative book called "The Screwtape Letters" by C.S. Lewis. It is written as a series of letters between a senior demon named Screwtape and a junior demon named Wormwood. In one letter, the demon Screwtape is telling his minion Wormwood, how to undermine the faith of a man who has become a

Christian. He basically says when he goes to church, all he sees is the frailty and imperfection of the other Christians. He hears people singing out of tune and sees people who look average or worse and are dressed funny, and seeing all that; he thinks it is all ridiculous. Then Screwtape says: Don't let him see the church, *"as we see her spread through all time and space, rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle that makes our boldest tempters uneasy. But fortunately, it is quite invisible to these humans.*

2

Illustration: To believe in the church is to see the church as God sees her. God is at work in a community of imperfect people who, because of His grace, have become a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. A couple of nights ago, I was at a gathering one of our small groups hosted for a family that is moving out of state. This family has been in our church for over 25 years! Around the table over dinner, we shared stories of the life-on-life impact of people in our church community. We remembered together stories of people who came to Christ, and served each other, and went through major life events together because we were all part of the same church. God has been, is now, and has promised to always be at work in a community of imperfect people who, because of His grace, have become a holy temple, a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

To believe in the church means to see the church the way God sees the church and ...

B. To believe in the church means to strive to be the church as God desires her.

Authentic faith is expressed in our attitudes and actions. When we receive members, we ask them to commit to support the church in her worship and work. A few years ago, we asked our members what that meant to them. *How does a member "support this church in its worship and work, to the best of your ability?"* For the most part, everybody that replied mentioned the same things; faithful attendance, giving, supporting each other in every other way, praying for members and pastors, participating in the ministries of the church bearing witness to

Jesus. Years ago, we asked this of our members and received six pages of answers like that, but of course, the important thing is how do you answer that question? How do you support the church if you come here, this church, in her worship and work?

Conclusion

I want to conclude with a quote from a famous pastor from a century ago, Charles Spurgeon. It is from a sermon based on a Scripture found in **2 Corinthians 8:5**, where Paul is writing about the Macedonian Christians. In that verse, he says, *they gave themselves first to the Lord and then by the will of God to us*. Spurgeon makes these comments....

All who have first given themselves to the Lord should, as speedily as possible, also give themselves to the Lord's people. How else is there to be a Church on the earth? ...As I have already said, the Church is faulty, but that is no excuse for your not joining it, if you are the Lord's. Nor need your own faults keep you back, for the Church is not an institution for perfect people, but a sanctuary for sinners saved by Grace, who, though they are saved, are still sinners and need all the help they can derive from the sympathy and guidance of their fellow Believers. The Church is the nursery for God's weak children where they are nourished and grow strong. It is the fold for Christ's sheep—the home for Christ's family. 3

To all of that, we could add that it is the holy temple, *a dwelling place for God in the Spirit*. ***We should treasure, and in treasuring, support the church in her worship and work because she is holy to God.***

Amen

A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

Almighty God, Your Holy Spirit awakens in me a conviction of my sin and need that drives me to Jesus as Lord and Savior. Open my eyes to see Christ as the Savior and only cornerstone for a church of redeemed sinners. He died for my sins and rose again as my Savior and Lord. I turn to and trust in him alone for my redemption. His saving grace brings peace to those who were far from you and from each other. In him, we are made fellow citizens of your kingdom and fellow members of your household. May we live that reality in faith. Amen.

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Holy Father, Help me to see the church as you see the church: a holy community of grace and faith. Help me to live in a way that expresses the oneness into which you have called us as your redeemed people, not as strangers or aliens but as fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God. This is all by grace so let us live in grace and extend grace to each other. Make us a gathered people who come together faithfully to worship and serve you in Jesus' name. Amen.

1 Hansen and Leeman, *Rediscover Church*, pp 11

2 Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Chap. 2

3 Charles Spurgeon, "*The Best Donation*," (No. 2234) an exposition of 2 Corinthians 8:5 delivered on April 5, 1891, in London, England.