Doctrine

The Church

Fairview Missionary Church| Angola, IN

Scripture: Assorted

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When you hear the word" church," what is the first thing that comes to your mind? For many people, it's a building, which makes sense because oftentimes we use phrases like "I am going to church," or when you drive by the building and you're explaining to somebody, you say, "That's the church, that's where I go." And when we go to Israel, or when I did this last trip on the footsteps of Paul, we often say, "Well, we visited a few churches," but technically, this building and those buildings that we visited over in Israel or wherever else, those are not a church; those are a church building.

The church is not a building; the church is a people. The church is a people; we are the church. I hope you all know that we could take this building away, we could take everything that you physically see here away, and we would still have a church because you and I are the church. We make up what God calls the church. In fact, many of you already know that in the early church, they didn't have buildings like this, right?

I mean, they just met in their homes, or they met in public places; they really met wherever they could, and that's because the church isn't primarily a building; it is people. The Greek word that we actually use in the New Testament that is translated" church" is this Greek word" ekklesia," which refers to an assembly or a gathering of people. It literally is translated as" the called out ones," those that are called out from the world and gather.

And so this morning, we are going to continue our series that we have been calling "Doctrine," and this is to help us answer the question: What do we believe, and why do we believe it? And so as we continue this morning talking about the doctrine of the church, we're not primarily talking about buildings, we're not talking about budgets, we're not talking about programs, we're not talking about denominational names, we're not even talking about a worship service on a Sunday morning.

Instead, as we talk about the doctrine of the church, we are talking about people who have been called out of darkness and called into a relationship with Jesus Christ. The church isn't something that we are merely supposed to attend; the church is something that we are supposed to be. And so this morning, we are going to look at this idea of being the church.

And as we have done through this entire series, I'm going to begin by reading the missionary churches' statement on what they believe the church is based on Scripture. What does the Scripture teach us about church? And then I'm going to spend the rest of our time together unpacking that by sharing eight biblical truths about what the Bible says the church is and what the church is supposed to be. So let me pray, and then we will jump in.

Heavenly Father, we come before You today, and we truly are grateful for the freedom that we experience in this country to be able to gather in a place like this and to truly be the church without fear of persecution. But God, we do know that there are others around the world that don't experience that same freedom, and

yet they continue to gather because being the church is what You have called us to be, and it is worth sacrifice.

And so we pray for the many that sacrifice around the world because of their faith in You and because they gather. Lord, my prayer is that we would be what You have called us to be as the church, that we would love others well, that we would point others towards You, and Father, that we truly could be a light in a dark world. And so continue to speak to us today. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. So let's begin. I'm going to read the missionary churches' stance on the church.

How do we interpret what the church is? "We believe that the invisible and universal church is a spiritual body that is comprised of all believers, both living and dead, over which Christ Himself is head and Lord. We believe that the local church is to be a loving community of Christ followers who gather for worship, prayer, instruction in the Word, mutual encouragement, and discipline.

As the temple of the Holy Spirit, the church is to display His holiness, bear His fruit, and be adorned by His gracious gifts. As people that are called out of the darkness, the church will embody the pervasive, life-transforming power of God by equipping the saints-- that's you and I-- for the work of ministry, bearing witness to the truth, and exerting influence in every realm of the broader culture.

We believe that the church is called by Jesus to proclaim the gospel locally, cross-culturally, and internationally, and to make disciples of everyone, everywhere, in the power of the Holy Spirit." So let's unpack that statement. What do we believe the church is? What does Scripture teach us we are supposed to be? Well, first, we believe that the church is both universal and local.

There are two ways that we view the church. The Bible gives us two ways to understand what the church is, and the first one is this idea of a universal church. The universal church is every genuine believer in Jesus Christ throughout history. So not only are we talking about all geographical lines that people could be separated from, we're talking about all throughout history.

So the universal church would be all believers in America, Africa, Asia, South America, Europe, but it's also the believers who lived 2, 000 years ago, the believers who are alive today, and the believers who are already in the presence of the Lord. We believe this is the universal church, that we are all one body, and sometimes you will hear me refer to that when we take communion.

When I tell you that we are joining with all of the saints that have gone before us, this heritage that we have, this history as the body of Christ. The Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 says it this way. He says, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body, whether Jews or Gentiles, whether slave or free, and we were all given the one Spirit to drink ." We believe in the universal church, but then there is also a local church, a local body of believers.

The New Testament talks repeatedly about these actual groups of believers that were gathering together in specific places. In Acts 2, Luke gives us a very clear picture of this earliest church, a group of individuals that worshiped together, they learned together, they prayed together. He tells us that they ate together, they served together, and they gave to people in need together.

Truly, Paul paints this picture of a group of people that shared life together around the common belief that Jesus is the Messiah. And so they did life together. And being a part of this universal church should lead you and I to be more committed to the local church. You see, Christianity was never designed to be a solo sport. Did you know that?

We were never designed to do it alone. This is a team life that we do together. You don't find in the Bible this biblical category of somebody that says," You know what? I love Jesus, but I don't really do church," right? Now, you've probably talked to a lot of people that say that. There's a lot of people that believe that,

and you know what? In all honesty, every one of us has probably had a time in our life where we've wanted to say that." You know, I love Jesus, but this church thing, that's just not for me." Because I understand.

People have been hurt by the church, and their pain should be taken seriously, but the answer isn't to abandon the church altogether. Every single local church is made up of imperfect people, and if you are waiting to find a perfect church, I am just here to tell you it's going to be a while, and if you ever join that church, it's not perfect anymore, right? Because none of us are perfect.

There is no perfect church because we're not perfect people, and we don't have it altogether. The church is not a gathering of people who have everything figured out. The church is a gathering of people who have discovered that Jesus is the answer to things that we can't fix ourselves. You know, I've been a part of this church now for 22 years, and every local church just carries with it a reputation in the community. Sometimes the reputation is good; sometimes you wonder how it got that reputation.

But for some reason, Fairview Missionary Church, for the last 22 years, when I used to invite people to Fairview, they would often look at me and say, "No, I can't go to that church. I've got too many issues. I've got too many struggles ." And everybody in that church has life all figured out. And I used to think to myself, "Are we talking about the same church?" You know? We certainly don't have life all figured out. We are just a group of people that rely on Jesus to fix our messes.

We are all imperfect people that gather, and so the goal for us is to recognize we don't have it all figured out. We are a group of imperfect people that just put our faith in Jesus. The second truth about the church is that the church belongs to Jesus. Jesus says this in Matthew 16:18 as He's talking to Peter. He says, "Listen, and I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it ." It's not our church.

Just so you know, this part of this family of believers is not our church; it's His church. Paul tells the Colossians in 1:18, and He is the head of the body, the church. Jesus is the head of the church. That means, just so you all are aware, the church doesn't belong to me as the pastor. It doesn't belong to the leadership team or the elders of the church. It doesn't belong to the congregation. Even though we are a missionary church, we don't belong to the denomination of the missionary church.

This church, this local group of believers, belongs to Jesus. We are His people. Now, you might think that's common sense. You say, "Pastor, of course, I know that. I know that the church belongs to Jesus." But we all can fall into the trap of becoming very focused on ourselves. Every single one of us can fall into this trap where, as you go to a church, you begin to ask questions like, "What do I like?

What kind of music do I prefer?" Or, "Why don't we do this anymore as a church?" Or, "Why are we doing that?" Or, "What makes me feel the best?" And you and I can accidentally begin thinking the church exists to make us happy. Did you know the church doesn't exist to make you happy? That's a hard truth for all of us. The church doesn't exist for our preferences. The church exists for the glory of Jesus Christ. That's why the church exists.

Now, you may think that I am naive as a pastor and I'm not aware of what kind of happens in churches, but I am very familiar with this phrase called church shopping. You guys have heard this before, right? You know, and I understand this. It's where people, you know, they're trying to figure out, they're trying to find a church that's comfortable to them or a church where they fit or where they feel like they can belong. And so they check out all of these different churches, and again, being a part of Fairview for the last 22 years and being in a small community, here is one of the things that I just want you to know that I already know, okay?

Everybody at one point or another has church shopped at Fairview Missionary Church and has attended Fairview Missionary Church, and every single person in Steuben County has probably left Fairview Missionary Church at one point or another, okay? I get that. We're always kind of looking around and saying,

"What do I desire? And what do I want?" And I want you to know there's nothing wrong in trying to find a church where you feel like you fit. There's nothing wrong in finding a church where you feel like, you know, "I feel loved there.

I feel cared for there." There's nothing wrong with that, but we need to constantly remind ourselves that the church is not about us. It's not about making us happy. The church doesn't exist for my preferences. The church exists for the glory of Jesus Christ. He is the head. We are the body. And the body doesn't get to tell the head what to do. Could you imagine if you woke up one morning and your foot decided to say," You know what? I'm tired of walking today. I'm going to be a hand"?

You know, it just, it doesn't work. The question as we think about being the church isn't, "What is best for me?" The question should be, "What is best for Christ and His mission?" Not, "What is best for me? What is best for Him and His mission?" And I want you to know that that is our desire as leadership at Fairview. We constantly try to ask that question, "What is best for Him?" The third thing that Scripture teaches us about church is that the church is a family.

I know I've already mentioned Acts 2, but I want to actually read what Luke tells us about that early church in Luke 2:42. Luke tells us that this church devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. He says that everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs that were performed by the apostles. He says all the believers were together and had everything in common.

They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. And every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes, and they ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And with all of that that they were doing, Luke tells us that the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Notice the word that Luke uses as he describes these individuals.

He says they were devoted to one another. Devoted, meaning they weren't casual about church. They weren't thinking, as many of us can be guilty of, "Well, if nothing better comes up on Sunday, maybe I'll go," right? No, they were devoted to it. They were committed. They understood that they needed one another. Peter tells us in 4: 8 - 9, "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sin.

And so offer hospitality to one another without grumbling." Apparently, God knew church people. He knew that it was possible to serve somebody while complaining at the same time. Please tell me I'm not the only one that's guilty of this, right? On the outside, you've got a smile on your face and you are faking like, "I am so glad I am here," but on the inside, you're thinking to yourself," You know what?

I'll volunteer, but somebody else should really be doing this." You know, "I'll do it, but I'm not going to have a good attitude while I do it ." Or, "Why do they always ask me? Isn't there somebody else they could ask?" This is not the way that we are supposed to serve the family in our church. We are supposed to serve one another with love because the church is a family. And you might say, "Pastor, I understand that the church is a family, but I've already got enough dysfunction in my family. I don't need to have more dysfunction in the church," right?

I understand it's hard. It's difficult. Families aren't always easy. But true families forgive each other. They love each other. They carry each other's burdens. They celebrate together. They cry together. We are a family. It's one of the things that I've recognized most as being a pastor that I didn't understand when I was younger. You need to understand that as a pastor, we not only celebrate with those who celebrate, but we mourn with those who mourn, and you have no idea what the person sitting next to you is going through.

I can have a meeting during the week where I do premarital counseling with a young couple that is giddy and excited, and they're happy about getting married, and everything is rosy and everything is great in the world,

and then my very next appointment is with a couple that is in the midst of a divorce. You see, the only way we learn about the things that are going on in the lives of the people around us are to actually be a family, to have conversations. And I know we're a larger church, but again, can I just share with you my last 22 years of being part of what would be called a larger church in America?

I've come to the realization that a large church is really just a bunch of smaller churches that gather together on Sunday. You have to find community here. And I am grateful. I know some of you come to Fairview and you want to come during the opening announcements and you leave during the closing song because you just need a time of healing, and I am so grateful that we can be that for you for a time. But just know that church is not meant to stay that way. There needs to be healing that comes.

You need to be a part of this family as we come together. The fourth thing that Scripture teaches us about the church is that the church is a body. The church is a body, and so because of that, every person matters. Paul uses this powerful image in 1 Corinthians 12 when he says that the church is the body of Christ, and because we are the body, every part matters. The body's not made up of one part, he says, but of many parts.

And every part, because of that, just like your body, every part has a vital role to play in the function of the body. Now, here is one of the struggles that you and I often have as the body of Christ. We look at other people within the body, and we begin comparing ourselves to them, and we wish that we had their gift, while somebody else is looking at us and wishing that they had our gift. Scripture is clear. We all have a different purpose.

You don't need somebody else's gift. You don't have to preach. You don't have to lead worship. You don't have to teach children. You don't have to stand on stage. You don't have to be the person that everyone notices. Simply, God asks us to be faithful to what God has given to us. Paul says that God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as He wanted them to be. And so this should be an encouragement to you because God has placed you and He has gifted you exactly where He wants you to be.

I love that the apostle Paul makes this next statement as he's talking about the body of Christ, helping us to understand that sometimes the people who make the biggest difference in a church are the people whose names most people never know. Can I just tell you that's true of Fairview Missionary Church? We are who we are today because of names that you probably would never know. This is the person who quietly serves.

This is the person who prays behind the scenes. This is the person who welcomes visitors with a smile. It's the person who cleans a room so that it can be used. It's the person who gives generously or teaches a child in a room in the hallway or sends an encouraging text or cards. Paul says that if one part suffers, every part suffers with it, but if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. This is what a healthy church looks like.

We all have a role to play. You know, just this last week, I was on a Zoom call with a lady that was over in the Goshen area with some other pastors, and we were talking about church, and it was kind of a survey - type thing. They were trying to figure out church. And one of the things that I have certainly noticed about being in the church over the last 22 years and in leadership is that the church has cycles. It has ups and downs, twists and turns. There are seasons where things are going great and more people are coming to the church, and it's a very exciting time.

And then there's other times where, you know, people stop coming or there's some kind of thing that's going on in the world. Think about COVID. Think about elections. Think about whatever else where you unintentionally offend people and people stop coming to the church. And you know what I have found to be true is when your church is declining, nobody asks you questions about what you're doing, right? They're not

saying like, "Well, how are you doing that? I want to know so I can learn." But when your church is growing, everybody wants to say, "What are you doing? What's working?

How are you getting people to come to your church?" Let me just tell you what is true in my life about that. As I've had these cycles, being in ministry for 22 years, and I hope I have a few more cycles left to go, this lady was talking about the church and just saying, "Hey, what's going on at your church?" And so I shared about the excitement of one of the things that's happened in the last two or three years, and I was just sharing about all the trying students that have started coming to Fairview. You know, we've been in this community. I've been here for 22 years, and for a long time, if we had five trying students on a Sunday, that was an awesome Sunday, right?

Now, sometimes we have 100 to 150, and this lady says, "What did you do differently? Why are they starting to come now?" Do you know what my answer was? "Nothing. I'm not doing anything different ." And you know what she said, which I knew to be true? She said," You know, I'm not surprised by that. I guarantee that they're coming because some old lady in your church has been praying for a long time." And I said, "Amen," to that. 100 %. Because some person that you don't know and I don't know has been praying that God would bring those individuals.

This is how it played out in youth ministry. When I was in youth ministry for nine years, you know, youth ministry goes ups and downs. There's cycles, twists and turns, and again, when things are not going good, nobody cares. When things are going great, other youth pastors are saying, "How are you getting all these kids to come to church?" And again, this is not in my notes, so don't be mad at me. This is just the truth, all right? When they would ask me, "What are you doing? What's different?" Every time that I saw growth in my youth ministry, it had nothing to do with my lessons, nothing to do with worship, the games we were doing, the small group leaders - sorry, small group leaders, I love you guys - every time we grew, it was because we had young ladies in our ministry that were popular and attractive, and they would ask kids to come, and every guy from the school would come to our youth group.

That's why they came. Had nothing to do with me. Had nothing to do with our ministry. You see, so often you can look at the person that's up front and say, "Well, the church is because of that person ." I am here to tell you it has nothing to do, usually, with the person up front. It has everything to do with the parts of the body that are playing their part and their role, that are doing things behind the scenes that nobody knows about because they are being faithful to what God has called them to do.

Number five, the church exists to make disciples. The church isn't a place where Christians come to consume religious goods and services. We are not called to be consumers. We are called to make disciples. Paul says in Ephesians 4:11, "So Christ himself gave some to be apostles and prophets, the evangelists, the pastors, and the teachers, in order to equip his people for works of service so that the body of Christ might be built up ." The job of the church leadership, just so you know, isn't to do all the ministry of the church.

The job of the church leadership is to equip God's people to do ministry and to lead by example. We are called to equip to help everybody do what God has called them to do. We are all to grow, more mature, and to be more useful for God's kingdom through word and through prayer and through worship and service and repentance and forgiveness. This is how the church multiplies. It's when you and I go out and love others because God has loved us.

The last three, these are going to go a lot quicker. The church is called to worship. One of the reasons that we gather as a church is to worship God. It is a central part of what it means to be a body of believers. And I know you know this, but I just need to remind you, worship is not just singing. I know we call that the worship part of the service, but worship is giving to God. It's giving him the honor that he deserves with our entire lives.

And so you and I don't just worship God as a church when we sing. We worship him when we pray. We worship him when we give and when we serve and when we obey. You know, when you turn against that temptation, that is a way to worship. When you forgive others, that's a way to worship. When you love your neighbor, when you use your gifts, that's a way to worship. And so the question about human beings is not whether you worship. It is what you will worship because everyone worships something.

Everyone is going to worship something. People will worship money. They worship success and careers. People worship sports and children, their own appearance, their comfort, or themselves. We all worship something. And so the goal of the church is to gather together to say, "We are going to give worship to the only person who deserves worship, Jesus Christ ." I'm not going to choose to worship any of these other things. And for me, this year, sometimes when you're tempted, God just takes it off the table, and for me to be tempted to worship sports this year is just not happening, right?

It's not happening. You guys know I'm a Michigan fan. There's no football anymore. I don't even watch football. Because we're all going to worship something. The church exists to redirect that worship to the person who deserves it, Jesus Christ, not just with our singing, but with our very lives. Next, the church is called to proclaim the gospel. The church was given the mission to go and make disciples. Jesus said, "By proclaiming the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, we are called to proclaim locally, cross-culturally, internationally.

We're to love people in our neighborhoods, our schools, our workplaces, our community, and the world, which is why we support financially missionaries that we send out that are sharing the good news of Jesus all around the world. It's why we support organizations and ministries here locally that are sharing the good news of Jesus. It's why we personally have the commitment to go out and to love those that God has placed around us, to love our community. Because a healthy church doesn't ask, "How can we get more people to come to us?" A healthy church asks, "How can we go to them?

How can we go to them?" This is why we send missionaries, serve our community, do things like Fall Fest 2. 0, minister to children, care for people who are hurting because we want to go and love in the name of Jesus. And finally, the church should be known for unity and holiness. Jesus prayed in John 17 that his followers would be one. He said that his followers would be known by our love, by our unity.

This doesn't mean that we need to agree on everything. Of course, we're going to have different worship styles that we prefer, different personalities, different traditions, and opinions, but we must never allow these secondary issues to become more important than our love for Jesus. I'm not going to spend too much time on this one because many of you understand how important I believe unity over preference is, but we are also called to be holy. That doesn't mean perfect. Again, if it did, none of us could be a part of the church.

When we are called to be holy, it means that we are called to be set apart, that God is continually transforming his people, the church. It means that we are not what we used to be. We have been transformed by the power of the Spirit, but we are not yet everything that we are going to be. We are in process of this transformation, and that's why as a church, we need both grace and truth. So what does this mean for us?

If the church is the people of God, the body of Christ, and the bride of Jesus, which I didn't even have time to get into that part, that we are the bride of Jesus, then being a part of the church should change the way we live. It means that you and I don't simply attend church. It means we belong to the church. It means that we don't simply come on a Sunday morning and sit in rows and sing songs and then leave and go on with our lives. It means that we live in relationship with other people that are a part of the church.

It means we don't simply come to receive, but we come to serve. It means we don't simply come to learn. That's good, but we come also to make disciples and to encourage others. It means that we don't simply come to sing about Jesus, but we come to live for Jesus. It means we don't simply come to gather, but we are sent.

And so as we think about what it means to be the church, maybe the question we need to ask isn't, "What does my church do for me?" Maybe the better question is, "What does Jesus want to do through me?" What would the church look like if everybody asked this question? "What do you want to do through me? God, how can you use me? What person can I encourage that's sitting next to me? What ministry can I serve? Who needs to hear the gospel?

Maybe sitting next to me on church, maybe it's my neighbor. Who needs prayer? Who needs help? Who needs to be discipled? What gift God have you given me that I could be used to serve others?" Can you imagine what God could do through a church like that? In Acts 2, Luke shared with us this early church that devoted themselves, remember, to God's word and to fellowship, to prayer, to worship, to caring for one another, serving one another. They gave generously.

And then Luke says the result of that church being the church that God called them to be was that the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. Our responsibility as the church is to be faithful. God's responsibility is the growth. And so my prayer is that we would be a church that loves deeply, that we would be a church that worships passionately, that we would be a church, a body of believers that knows God's word and takes holiness seriously.

I pray that we would be a church that cares for the hurting, that we would be a church where every person uses their God - given gifts to love and to serve others, that we would be a church that makes disciples, and that we would be a church that points people towards Jesus, which is why our mission statement is helping others take their next step toward Jesus. That is why we exist. We just want to be a family. Let's close.

Heavenly Father, thank you for the church. Of course, not the building. We're grateful for that too, but thank you for the people that make up the church. Thank you for the gifts that you have given to them, the abilities, the passions, the desires. My prayer is that we would use those for your glory and to serve others. Help us not to be so concerned about what we want and instead to be concerned about what you want.

Thank you for the ability to gather. Thank you that we don't have to go through life alone, but you have called us to live in community. So help us to do that well. We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.