

ASKING THE WRONG QUESTION

The Question Isn't What Is The Church, But Rather Who Is The Church

MATTHEW 16:18

18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

1) It is easy to do things and not understand why we do them

- Sometimes we do things without thinking about why we do them or what they're for. We often do this with the church as well. We attend church but we sometimes we don't think about what the church is or rather who the church is.

2) The church is not a building.

- IT'S EASY TO LOSE SIGHT OF THE REALITY THAT YOU'RE NOT JUST GOING TO CHURCH, YOU ARE THE CHURCH.
- How through history did we come too understand the church as a building?
- 1 Peter 2:1-12 - We are a people set apart, this is the church.

3) The church is not the purveyor of religious goods and services.

- When we view the Church solely as the place we go to "be fed," the focus ceases to be on God and it turns towards us. It becomes what we want and whether we are fed and whether or not our needs are met. What if, it's really not about us? What if it starts and ends in God? And what if this God has invited us into greater, more intimate, loving participation with God and each other in this community of faith for the sake of His mission to redeem people back to himself.
- What are three ways we can see the church?
- Matthew 5:14, Matthew 28:19-20

4) The church is not a business.

- A church doesn't exist for profit but for God's glory.

5) A great working definition of the church

- Ephesians 5:25-30, Matthew 16:18, 1 Corinthians 5:11-13, Ephesians 4:11-13. Acts 2

"The local church is a community of regenerated believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. In obedience to Scripture they organize under qualified leadership, gather regularly for preaching and worship, observe the biblical sacraments of baptism and communion, are unified by the Spirit, are disciplined 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."

QUESTIONS, THOUGHTS AND SCRIPTURE FOR FURTHER STUDY

The church isn't just an invention of Christians who were trying to fulfill certain needs—fellowship, teaching, and so on. It's much more than that. In fact, the Bible seems to hold the local church out as a unique organization, one unlike any parachurch organization, any other ministry, or any other institution in the world. It is, by Jesus's own royal prerogative, the embassy of the kingdom of heaven to this rebellious world. This reality is mostly lost on Christians today, and yet that's essentially how the Bible describes it.

Constituted, Chartered, Commissioned

Do you remember when the church was established in the Bible? It wasn't in the book of Acts, though that's what many people guess. It was during the ministry of Jesus himself, when Peter became the first person to recognize Jesus for who he really is—"the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matt. 16:16). When Peter made that confession, it was as if the troop ships had landed, and the King's counter invasion of a rebellious world began in earnest. Jesus immediately told Peter that, upon this rock—that is, upon him as the first to confess Jesus's true identity, and later upon all those who would recognize Jesus in like manner—he would build his church, his "assembly," and the gates of hell would not prevail against it.

Then, just as a king would do for an ambassador, Jesus gave that church the right to speak with his authority. That's what he meant when he said the church would hold the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and that whatever it bound or loosed on earth would be bound or loosed in heaven (Matt. 16:19; cf. 18:18). In effect, Jesus was giving his church a royal charter of authority; it and it alone would be his embassy on the earth. Finally, he commissioned it with a charge that, until he returned, that embassy was to be about the work of proclaiming his gracious kingship and making disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:18–20).

The church, then, wasn't the idea of a bunch of pastors who wanted some job security. It was Jesus's idea. He constituted it, he chartered it, and he commissioned it; and now the church plays a grand and unique role in God's plan of salvation. That's why Paul could say in Ephesians 3:10 that it is "through the church" that God's "manifold wisdom" is going to be made known to the universe. It's not primarily through parachurch organizations, ministries, or podcasts, Paul says, but through the church that God is carrying out his purpose of glorifying himself.

Body Building in the Word

The main means by which we grow into mature Christians in the church is through hearing and responding to God's Word together. From the beginning of the Bible, God has always given spiritual life by his Word. He called the universe into existence by his voice. He gave Adam life by the breath of his mouth. He made the dry bones live by the preaching of Ezekiel. He called dead Lazarus out of the tomb by calling to him with his voice. And now he calls us as Christians to hear his Word preached week in and week out (2 Tim. 4:1–2). And as we do, we are challenged and taught and encouraged and rebuked and trained (2 Tim. 3:16).

Moreover, and crucially, you cannot benefit from everything God does through the preaching of the Word in a church by listening to recordings. There's nothing mystical in that claim. It's just that part of what God does through the preaching of the Word is that he molds and shapes a church together as they hear and respond to the Word together. They are made more like Jesus together. Look how Paul describes the effect of all this:

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

That kind of thing just won't—indeed can't—happen in solitude, no matter how solid the teaching on your iPod is.

Locking Arms with Others

So let's think back to the first question we asked: Do you need to be a member of a church to be a Christian? Well, no. But unless there are extraordinary circumstances preventing that for you, you should realize that Scripture simply doesn't even contemplate a follower of Jesus who is not vitally, obviously, genuinely, and sincerely committed to a body of believers.

God did not intend us to be lone soldiers. For the duration of the battle—however long it is before the King returns—he intended us all to lock arms with other soldiers, protecting them, watching out for them, bearing them up, and step-after-step encouraging them to press on in the life and faith of Jesus our Lord.

This excerpt is adapted from the ESV Men's Devotional Bible written by Greg Gilbert is the senior pastor of Third Avenue Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.