

We Are The Church

Welcome to our new series we are beginning today called “**We Are The Church**”! Our goal for this series is to help us understand why the church is to be such a vital part of our lives as followers of Jesus. There can be a lot of misunderstandings about the role of the church in our lives and there are quite a few opinions on how people feel about the church and on how they define the church. Some of them are good while others are not so good. Some see the church as a vital part of our lives while others see the church as being greatly flawed and want nothing to do with it. **How do you view the church?**

What we hope to accomplish over these next four weeks is to provide you with a clear biblical description of what actually constitutes a **CHURCH** and then help you understand the **Threefold Ministry of the Church** and the vital role these ministries play in the development of your relationship with God. All that we are going to do over these next 4 Weeks is designed to help you understand how God wants to use the CHURCH to be an essential part of God's discipleship growth plan for your life. I hope that by the time we are done you will have a newfound appreciation for the Church and that we all will change our mindset from thinking about the church as a place we GO to understanding that the CHURCH is who we are supposed to BE.

Before we begin let's pray and ask God to capture our hearts with what He desires the church to be in our lives. (PRAY)

Today, I want us to begin our series by first taking a look at how God sees His CHURCH and how it is He defines her. We need a good biblical foundation as to what makes a church a church and we need to understand how God sees the church.

First of all, the word translated “church” in our English translations of the Bible is actually in the original Greek the word “ekklesia” which means “a called out assembly or gathering of believers”. The word “church” is from Old English and it is derived from the German word (“Kirche” - pronounced kirk). The word church was used to convey the idea of a place of worship or as many would refer to it as “the house of the Lord.” It was first used in the 13th century and it was used to describe a group of Christian believers or to describe the place where Christians would meet together for worship. If we are honest, most of us when we hear the word church we think of a building or a gathering place. Moving forward I want us to challenge our thinking. From now on when we use the word “CHURCH” I don't want you to think about a place where we come together to worship. I want you to think of an “ekklesia” - a community of people who have been called to follow Jesus. It is important for us to understand that when God thinks about the church He is not concerned with a building nor a place of worship. He is thinking of a specific group of people whom He has called unto Himself. We need to understand that biblically speaking **WE ARE THE CHURCH!** Jesus didn't die for a building nor a Sunday service. He died for you and for me! Listen to how Paul describes the love Jesus has for us when addressing the Ephesians.

Ephesians 5:25-27 (NIV) Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her **26** to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, **27** and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.

The blood of Jesus doesn't power wash our church buildings. He doesn't disinfect our church meeting spaces making them bacteria or virus free. Heck, if He had, we wouldn't have had to shut down during COVID. His blood washed my sin and your sin away. Those of us who have placed our faith in Him, He refers to us as the CHURCH. We are the ones who are cleansed, made holy and are without blemish. WE ARE THE CHURCH!

Secondly, we need to understand that when we refer to the CHURCH that there are two aspects to the church. There is the Local Body of Believers that assemble together in specific locations around the world. For example, VC is a local body of believers that meet together here in (Lumberton, Pembroke, Bladen) for the purpose of being a witness in our communities. We see example after example of local assemblies all throughout the NT located in specific cities and regions of the world that helped to facilitate the spread of the Gospel in those areas and in other regions of the world. For example, the Apostle Paul ministered in Ephesus, Philippi, a region called Galatia, in Thessaloniki and in Rome just to name a few.

Here is an example of how Paul addressed a few of His letters to different local churches:

Ephesians 1:1-2 (NIV) **1** Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To God's holy people in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus. **2** Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Galatians 1:1-5 (NIV) **1** Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— **2** and all the brothers and sisters with me, To the churches in Galatia: **3** Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, **4** who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father, **5** to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Romans 1:1-7 (NIV) **1** Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God— **2** the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures **3** regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, **4** and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. **5** Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake. **6** And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. **7** To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ

Each of these churches were considered as a local body of believers. But we need to understand that the magnitude of the church doesn't just end with us in our local context. We, as a local body of believers, are also part of a larger network of believers throughout the world, along with all of the believers who have since passed from this life and are now with Jesus. This is what we would refer to as the Church universal. We have one thing in common. We are all a

part of the body of Christ through faith in Jesus and one day we will all be gathered together (we the church) referred to as the bride to (Jesus) who is referred to as the bridegroom.

Revelation 19:6-9 (NIV) **6** Then I heard what sounded like a great multitude, like the roar of rushing waters and like loud peals of thunder, shouting: "Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. **7** Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. **8** Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear." (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of God's holy people.) **9** Then the angel said to me, "Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" And he added, "These are the true words of God."

For clarity's sake and for the sake of our discussion in this series as we talk about CHURCH, we are going to be referring to the Local Assembly as we discuss the role of the church in your life as a believer. But we do want you to be aware that we are all part of a much bigger family as believers. We also want to highlight the importance of the Local Body as an instrumental part of God's growth plan for you as a believer.

Lastly, we need to understand the basic foundation of what constitutes a church and what makes it different from any other assembly of people. In order to do this I want us to spend the remainder of our time this morning looking at the birth of the church as we have it recorded for us in **Acts 2** and I want us to take note of the THREE Identifying MARKS of a CHURCH.

Up until the time of Jesus and His departure back to the Father there were only special times when God poured out His Holy Spirit on mankind. It was usually on a prophet God would anoint for a special task such as we see with the prophets of the OT. There were also special moments where God poured out His Spirit on individuals to accomplish certain tasks such as He did with Moses, David, Samson, and the disciples. But then there is what takes place here in Acts which is unlike anything God had done up to this point. It was through this event that God would signal to His people the start of something new. This something new was The birth of the CHURCH where God would pour out His Holy Spirit on all those who would call on Jesus for salvation.

Acts 2:1-21 (NIV) **1** When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. **2** Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. **3** They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. **4** All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.

5 Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. **6** When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken. **7** Utterly amazed, they asked: "Aren't all these who are speaking Galileans? **8** Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? **9** Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, **10** Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome **11** (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!" **12** Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, "What

does this mean?” **13** Some, however, made fun of them and said, “They have had too much wine.

14 Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: Peter and the 11 didn't let this opportunity to share the gospel pass by. God literally handed them a huge platform to share the gospel of Jesus. Are you and I taking the opportunities in our lives to share the gospel too?

“Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. **15** These people are not drunk, as you suppose. It's only nine in the morning! **16** No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: **17** “In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. **18** Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. **19** I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. **20** The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. **21** And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’

Peter then goes on through verses 22-35 to tell them about what has happened and how Christ has made it possible for the Holy Spirit to be poured out on man by dying on the cross for our sins and being resurrected in victory over death and sin. This being proof that Jesus is the promised Messiah they had been waiting for.

Acts 2:36-40 (NIV) 36 “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah” Notice the response of the people upon hearing Peter's testimony.

37 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?”

38 Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. **39** The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

40 With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Peter didn't just share the message of the gospel. He pressed in on, reasoned with and pleaded with the people to turn to Jesus. Don't just share the message in general, press into the lives of others and reason with them to turn to Jesus.

When we come to the close of **Acts 2** we see the first assembly of the church and I want you to pay close attention to the identifying marks of what made them different from any other assembly or gathering of people.

Acts 2:41 (NIV) Those who accepted his message What was the message? It was vs. 38, “**REPENT** and be **BAPTIZED** as a response to what Jesus has done for you!” Those who accepted his message were baptized. The act of baptism (being immersed in water) was their

affirmation response to the message. This would also give way to them receiving the Holy Spirit. Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their numbers that day. They wanted to be included in the assembly because they wanted to walk with Jesus!

Identifying Mark # 1 - A Church is a group of people who desire to WALK with Jesus! The true church is one that is made up of people who have come to realize their sin has separated them from God and that Jesus has paid the penalty for their sin making it possible for them to be restored into right fellowship with God and that by trusting in Jesus they now have forgiveness and cleansing from their sin.

God has called us to walk with Him and because we now have a desire to accept His invitation we desire to repent (turn) from our sin, accept Christ's atonement for our sin and are now willing to follow Him. BAPTISM becomes an opportunity to make two public statements. 1) I no longer identify with my sin and living life my way but I now want to be identified with Jesus. Baptism is a symbolic picture of dying to myself and coming alive in Christ. 2) I am making a statement that I want to be identified with God's people (the church). Baptism doesn't save you! Faith in Jesus saves you! Baptism simply becomes an outward declaration of what has happened in your heart. You must accept Jesus to be part of the Church.

Where do you stand? Do you desire to walk with Jesus? Have you turned from your sin and accepted Jesus? Have you made that public through Baptism? **Identifying Mark # 1 - A Church is a group of people who desire to WALK with Jesus!**

Identifying Mark # 2 - A Church is a group of people who desire to GROW in likeness to Jesus!

Acts 2:42 (NIV) They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

To grow in likeness to Jesus we must devote ourselves to some vital disciplines to help us grow to do just that. These vital disciplines are listed here in verse 42.

- 1) **"Devoted to the apostle's teachings"** is basically a commitment to learning God's word and what it teaches me about myself, about God and my relationship to Him. Not just on my own but in **"fellowship"** with other believers for personal accountability and for growth in understanding of God's word where I have others to help me understand how to apply it to my life.

2 Timothy 3:16-17 (NIV) **16** All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, **17** so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Proverbs 27:17 (NIV) "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."

- 2) **"Breaking of bread"** is a reference to taking communion together as Jesus did with His disciples in Luke 22. This is a time for us to remember what Jesus has done for us and another point of accountability where we can examine our hearts together in worship.

1 Corinthians 11:27-32 (NIV) **27** So then, whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord. **28** Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup. **29** For those who eat and drink without discerning the body of Christ eat and drink judgment on themselves. **30** That is why many among you are weak and sick, and a number of you have fallen asleep. **31** But if we were more discerning with regard to ourselves, we would not come under such judgment. **32** Nevertheless, when we are judged in this way by the Lord, we are being disciplined so that we will not be finally condemned with the world.

- 3) **"Prayer"** is all about cultivating a relationship with God. It is a vehicle for worship, confession, as well as intercession on behalf of others.

Matthew 6:9-13 (NIV) **9** "This, then, is how you should pray:"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, **10** your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. **11** Give us today our daily bread. **12** And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. **13** And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.'

If you are growing in likeness to Christ these disciplines will be part of your life. How's your devotion to God's word? How is your fellowship with other believers? Are you in community with other believers? Are you in a Vgroup? Part of a Service Team? In a Discipleship relationship? How's your prayer life?

Identifying Mark # 1 - A Church is a group of people who desire to WALK with Jesus!

Identifying Mark # 2 - A Church is a group of people who desire to GROW in likeness to Jesus!

Identifying Mark # 3 - A Church is a group of people who actually LOVE like Jesus!

Acts 2:43-47 (NIV) **43** Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. **44** All the believers were together and had everything in common. **45** They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. **46** Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, **47** praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

To love like Jesus we need opportunities that will help us cultivate relationships where we get to practice loving others and where we allow God to use others to love us. Jesus loved the church!

Do you? Even with all of its imperfections and imperfect people He still loves the church. Remember how God defines love - **1 Corinthians 13:4-8 (NIV)** **4** Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. **5** It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. **6** Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. **7** It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. **8** Love never fails. This kind of love will not grow in isolation and it will not grow when the people are easy to love. This kind of love draws people to God. Heals broken hearts. Overcomes evil.

This is what makes a church distinct from all other groups or gatherings! This is what God wants His church to look like! We may worship differently when it comes to music and styles of worship. We may be a part of different networks and denominations, but in the end, this is what God's church should look like. This is what God had in mind when He instituted an assembly of called out believers. You see, we are not called as believers to GO to church (to a place or a building) but we are called to BE the church.

Invitation:

What is your relationship to the church? Do you just GO to church or are you BEING the church?

Have you repented of your sin and TRUSTED in JESUS? Do you DESIRE to walk with Him?

Are you growing in Christlikeness through the WORD/FELLOWSHIP/PRAYER?

Are you allowing His LOVE to flow in your life?

Next week we will start looking at the threefold ministry of the church and how each of these ministries help us grow in our faith.