



“His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Ephesians 3:10-11 (NIV 1984)

So far, we have focused primarily on our individual Christian experience and our personal foundations as believers. In the remaining sessions, we will concentrate on the bigger picture of God’s corporate purpose for His people—the Church.

WHAT IS “CHURCH”?

1 Corinthians 12:13 says, “in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body.” That “one body” is what we now call church.

The English word *church* comes from the Old English and German word *kirche*. This word has its origin in the Greek word *kuriakos*, which means “pertaining or belonging to the Lord.” Perhaps surprisingly, it is used only twice in the New Testament, but on these occasions it is not translated in our English Bibles as *church*. In 1 Corinthians 11:20, it is used to refer to “the Lord’s supper,” and in Revelation 1:10, it is used to refer to “the Lord’s day.”

The Greek word translated as *church* in our English Bibles is *ekklesia*. This word comes from the combination of two Greek words, *ek* meaning “out” and *kaleo* meaning “to call.” It could, therefore, be thought of as literally meaning “called-out (ones).” It was not a religious word, but would have been used either to refer to a group of people summoned together for a particular purpose, or more generally to any gathering of people. It is used in Acts 19 to refer to both a mass assembly of citizens (verses 32 and 41) and a legal assembly that could settle a dispute (verse 39). However, of the 115 times that *ekklesia* appears in the New Testament, those are the only three times that it does not specifically refer to the people of God, and where it is not translated in most English versions of the Bible as *church*.

So why, in our Bibles, has the word *church* rather than, say, *assembly*, been chosen for *ekklesia*? The phrases *ekklesia kuriake*, meaning “assembly of the Lord,” and *oikos kuriake*, meaning “house of the Lord,” were commonly used by the post-New Testament Church. The emphasis was on *kuriake*—that which distinguished the people from just any assembly, and the building from just any house. By the time the Scriptures were being translated into English, *church* had similarly become established as the name given to those who assembled in the name of the Lord, and to the buildings in which they met. Subsequently most translators decided that *church* was an acceptable substitute for *ekklesia* where it was clearly referring to the people of God.

Though *church* can mean different things to different people today, our understanding must line up with what Jesus would no doubt have had in mind when he chose the word *ekklesia* ([Matthew 16:18](#)). For example, *ekklesia* could never be sensibly used for a religious building, as by definition it refers to people. Neither could His *ekklesia* have been a mixture of believers and non-believers, as His use of the word could only refer to those who are “elected” and “called out,” both being terms that apply to believers only ([2 Peter 1:10](#)). This is an important point that we should consider further.

A SET-APART PEOPLE

God’s purpose has always been to have a chosen, set-apart people. All through the Old Testament, He emphasizes the importance of His people being distinct from those around them, so as to avoid corruption and in order to be clearly seen as different from those who do not belong to Him. He gave commands that would distinguish them and warned them against adopting the ways of other nations, inter-marriage with them, and so on. He even gave commands prohibiting the combination of certain ingredients in food and materials in clothing, as ongoing reminders of His abhorrence of mixture.

This principle continues with the Church. We are a people who have been chosen and “called out” by God to belong to Him and bear testimony to Him in the world (see, for example, [1 Peter 2:9](#)). In the New Testament, Christians are often referred to as *saints*, translating the Greek word *hagios*, meaning “those who have been set apart and consecrated as holy” (so all true Christians are saints, contrary to the way that certain denominations have interpreted the word).

Therefore, a *church*, which is an unashamed mixture of Christians and unbelievers, is a contradiction in terms, just as one could not properly use the term *flock* to describe a mixed group of sheep and cows. Historically, where *church* has become a mixture of saved and unsaved, dilution and corruption have resulted, and the testimony and work of God have suffered greatly. This has been the case where, for example, Christianity has become the national religion and where church membership has been a product of citizenship, culture, or family, rather than authentic conversion.

PURITY AND CLARITY

Of course, non-Christians should be welcome as visitors to the assembly of the saints, but they should not be allowed to fall into the delusion that they are Christians by virtue of association and mental assent. Quite apart from the potential negative effects on the Church, we do these visitors a terrible wrong if it is not clear to them that, unless they are born again, they are not, and indeed can not be, part of the *ekklesia*.

In recent times, some evangelical churches have gone to great lengths to accommodate unbelieving visitors and to make them feel comfortable. This philosophy regarding the so called “unchurched” (a term which confusingly focuses on whether people have “attended church,” rather than on whether or not they have been “called out” and saved) has often not resulted in clear and radical conversions to Christ. Instead it has been another means of producing the confusing mixture of saved and unsaved, genuine believers and mere churchgoers.

Because in these churches “success” inevitably becomes primarily measured by numbers, the subsequent pressure to “give the people what they want” is very intense. Tragically, while the unsaved are made to feel most at home in the meetings of the church, the Holy Spirit is often ignored or even “shut out” from what should be *His* home. This happens as gifts and manifestations of the Holy Spirit are discouraged for risk of offending the unbeliever!

Perhaps a more literal translation of *ekklesia* may have proved helpful in maintaining the purity and testimony of the Church over the years. However, if we are to continue using the word *church*, it is very important that we hold to the original meaning of *ekklesia* as we consider its use in Scripture.

THE CHURCH IN SCRIPTURE

The Bible presents two views of the church:

1. THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

“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.” [Matthew 16:18](#)

In scriptures such as this, *church* is being used in a universal sense. The “universal Church” (also known as the “invisible Church”) is all born-again people—past, present and future. Many have died and are already in heaven ([Ephesians 3:14-15](#)). Those on earth will be in a host of different locations, conditions and denominations. However, because they are all born again, they are spoken of collectively as the one true Church, the redeemed community.

2. THE LOCAL CHURCH

“Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.” [Acts 14:23 \(NIV 1984\)](#)

In scriptures such as this, *church* refers to a group of Christians living in the same locality who are joined in intentional, committed fellowship under properly established leadership:

“This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—” [Titus 1:5](#)

The letters written by the apostles addressed and defined the church in any given location as all those who were genuine believers. Originally, the local church in each city or area was one, as the following verses indicate:

“To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:”
[1 Corinthians 1:2](#)

“Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:”
[1 Thessalonians 1:1](#)

“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:” [Philippians 1:1](#)

So scriptures such as these again confirm that there is no notion in the writings of the New Testament of Church being a mixture of believers and unbelievers. Neither does the concept of denominations fit into the biblical picture.



THE UNITY OF THE CHURCH

“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, ‘I follow Paul,’ or ‘I follow Apollos,’ or ‘I follow Cephas,’ or ‘I follow Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” [1 Corinthians 1:10-13](#)

There is no support in the Bible for the Church being legitimately divided over relational or doctrinal disagreements. In fact, the entire weight of Scripture emphasizes the central significance of unity. Although joinings to specific apostles were evident, Paul clarified that this would not be grounds for denominationalism, which he would have described as a dividing of the body of Christ.

Over the centuries, the body of Christ has been broken, fragmented and “denominationalized” so that in every town and city today there are many local churches, all with different labels. Ultimately, the unity of all God’s people must become more than just theological truth. It must also be a manifest reality. Jesus prayed for this in [John 17](#) and His prayer is guaranteed its answer:

“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.” [John 17:20-23](#)

Because of our histories and backgrounds, for some of us it may be hard to grasp the beautiful simplicity of the Bible’s view of the Church. But we must work at reshaping our concepts.

The twin culprits responsible for the grossly fractured Church are the neglect of the Holy Spirit and the neglect of the Word of God. But, as dire as the overall state of the Church might be, we are living in days of restoration. Throughout the world, Christians are submitting afresh to the infilling, leading, and gifts of the Holy Spirit. Combined with this, the Bible is once again triumphing over tradition, false teaching, and misleading experiences. There is a renewed confidence in the authority of Scripture and the wisdom of God regarding how we are to co-labor with Him in the building of His Church. We must be faithful to the structural principles God has given to us in His Word if we are to experience the miracle of true unity.

GOD’S STRATEGY FOR UNITY

“As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.” [Ephesians 4:1-6 \(NIV 1984\)](#)

It is wonderful to know that the unity of the Spirit has been given to all believers. We do not need to work at achieving it, but are simply instructed to maintain it. The vital components for the outworking of unity are revelation and right response. We must first have a revelation of the oneness that has been won for us in Christ. Secondly, we must respond with an attitude that demonstrates the fruit of the Spirit.

However, in addition to the unity of the Spirit, there is a further unity God requires for His children—unity in the faith. To attain this unity, we require the assistance of divinely-empowered individuals. These too, God has provided for us:

“But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore it says, ‘When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.’ (In saying, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” [Ephesians 4:7-13](#)

God’s strategic plan was to demonstrate His wisdom by pouring out His Spirit on the Church and seeding it with these gifted individuals, who would in turn equip, unify and bring her to maturity in readiness for His triumphant return. In the next four sessions, we will explore these gifted ministries in detail.

GOD’S STRATEGY FOR MATURING THE CHURCH

When we are born again, it is as spiritual infants. We are born of the Spirit with, as it were, the DNA of Christ within us. The analogy of a baby craving milk and then moving on to solid food is precisely the language Scripture uses in reference to the Word of God in our spiritual development. However, as critical as the disciplines are to our spiritual growth, Scripture makes clear that it is not by them alone that we are able to be thoroughly transformed into His likeness. It is, in fact, the ministry of the apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher—functioning in unison—that will bring the entire Church to full Christ-likeness.

“...we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.” [1 John 3:2](#)

It is vitally important for us to realize that it is Jesus Himself that is the ultimate Apostle ([Hebrews 3:1](#)), Prophet ([Hebrews 1:1-3](#)), Evangelist ([Luke 4:18](#)), Shepherd ([Psalm 23](#)) and Teacher ([Mark 9:5](#)). In fact, these ministries are actually nothing more than expressions of who He is. He has now imparted these characteristics as gifts to individuals so that they might give themselves to the Church to help shape and equip God’s people in the process of being transformed into His likeness.

God’s intention is not simply for these ministries to be present and functioning, but rather for them to have completed their task, resulting in the entire Body becoming apostolic, prophetic, evangelistic, and able to teach and shepherd—in other words, to be just like Jesus!

THE RETURN OF JESUS CHRIST

It is important for us to bear in mind that the perfecting of the Church is leading to a glorious goal. The ultimate objective of the united, mature, Christ-like Church is the return of the Bridegroom, Jesus Christ.

“Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready;” [Revelation 19:7](#)

One of the evidently distinguishing features of the first century Church, compared to much of the modern Church, was its anticipation and longing for the return of Jesus. This must be restored to the generation that will have the privilege of greeting the coming King.

“The Spirit and the Bride say, ‘Come’... He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon.’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!” [Revelation 22:17, 20](#)

