

07

What is Church?

What do we mean by 'church'?

What is the purpose of the church?

The church is a body

What does church do?

07 : WHAT IS CHURCH?

There are many varieties and expressions of Church and so many different denominations - why? Are they all the same? Where did church start and why is there a church anyway?

All these questions and more may have occupied your thoughts at some point as we have travelled through this series of studies and we'll attempt to answer some of them in this study.

PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

*What is your
experience of church
(if any)?
What are your thoughts
on 'church'?*

There seems to be so many different churches and it can be very confusing as to why and what the difference between them is.

When people talk about church, they have an image in their minds of a certain type of building – they may have had experience of this personally or they have gleaned their opinions and insights through films, television or other people's experiences they have heard about.

For most people who are not regular church goers, their only contact with a church is at a wedding, christening or funeral. Occasionally they may go to a carol service.

But what is the church for? Where did it start? And is our English way of 'doing church' the only way or the right way?

To answer these questions, we need a starting point – somewhere where we can get the required information.

Unfortunately, there isn't a great deal of genuine information available. When we say genuine information, we are talking about the information we need to give us an unbiased view of church. Men and women have gathered together to worship since they first walked on the earth. That is in our nature.

This gathering together has taken place in many different situations and locations – within a building of some kind or in the open air.

But is this the genuine article? Where can we get the information we need? Well for the Christian church this information is found in the bible and it will surprise you to find that it doesn't talk about church being buildings: it speaks about the church being people!

*Aquila and
Priscilla greet
you warmly in the
Lord, and so
does the church
that meets in
their house*

1 CORINTHIANS 16:19

*Give my
greetings ... to
Nympha and the
church in her
house*

COLOSSIANS 4:15

Jesus told His followers that he would build His church. The language of the day was Aramaic and the New Testament of the bible was written in Greek so translation of Jesus original words have gone through a few changes. The word Jesus used when talking about “church” referred to a gathering or assembly of people, and had nothing to do with the religious systems of His day.

In actual fact this was already happening in the society around them, so this wasn’t a brand-new word but one which people would easily identify with. So church is really about people and not buildings.

However, practically we need to meet together under a roof primarily to protect us from the weather! There are many other reasons for meeting in buildings, but these are more to do with the administration of a group of people gathering together.

Indeed, there are several references in the bible that speak of the church that meets in so and so’s house – therefore where people meet isn’t so important as the fact that they meet together .

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH?

As we have seen the Church is about people gathering together in a group of some kind, but what is the reason?

As with any other group of people who meet together there is a common purpose or reason for that gathering.

We are told in the bible that Jesus said He would build His church - ***I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*** Matthew 16:18. Two points to note here (1) the church belongs to Jesus and, (2) it is Jesus who builds the church. You may think that we are splitting hairs on this but this fact gets lost in the organisation side of church

To Philemon, our dear friend ... and the church that meets in your home

PHILEMON 1:2

I (Jesus) will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

MATTHEW 16:18.

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another.

Hebrews 10:25

The first and foremost reason the church exists it is to worship God – this will take many varied forms and practices depending on several factors.

Primarily believers in Jesus meet together to worship God and to learn more about Him. The style and form of the meetings will vary, as will where they meet – be it church buildings, people’s homes, coffee bars, pubs, theatres etc.

THE CHURCH IS A BODY

One of the main writers in the New Testament in the bible is a guy called Paul. In one of his letters he likens the church to a human body. He says that as the human body is made up of many parts so also is the church made up of many parts and here, he is talking about people and that we have different gifts and abilities to help the church function.

Paul then goes on to say that just because a member of the body might say “I am not an eye therefore I don’t belong to the body”, or “because I am not a hand I don’t belong to the body”, it doesn’t mean that particular part isn’t important or doesn’t belong to the body.

A big toe might seem to be a nuisance – especially if you have stubbed it on a bed leg or something else! Yet the big toe does in fact play an important part in our balance in conjunction with the little toe when walking.

What about the appendix? It is found at the junction of the small intestine and large intestine. If you have had appendicitis you will know how excruciatingly painful it is – and if it bursts it can be extremely dangerous. Until recently it was thought the appendix did little for our bodies. But it is there for a reason. Recent developments have found that the appendix may in fact act as a reservoir for ‘good bacteria’. These bacteria contribute to keeping the gut healthy and helping you recover from infections.

*He (Jesus Christ)
is the head of the
body, the church*

COLOSSIANS 1:18

*The body is a
unit, though it is
made up of many
parts; and though
all its parts are
many, they form
one body. So it is
with Christ*

1 CORINTHIANS 12:12

Using these analogies, we can see that everyone in a church is important – no-one is surplus to requirements. The church is inclusive as Jesus showed His disciples, and the writers in the New Testament were keen to underline.

Church is family. Its where we begin to demonstrate our faith by loving each other. God really cares about how we relate to each other as well as how we relate to Him. As referenced in study 1, its all about relationship.

So a church is more about people than it is about buildings. Indeed there are those churches that do not have a building to meet in and gather in the open air

WHAT DOES THE CHURCH DO?

As we have seen in the previous section the church is an assembly of people who believe in God as Father and that His Son, Jesus Christ suffered, died and rose again to restore the broken relationship between the human race and God.

The early church met together in the temple but also in one another's homes. They learnt about Jesus and the Christian faith through the teaching of the apostles, ate together, worshipped God and prayed. In gathering together, we as believers, find common purpose and strengthen one another in our faith.

Jesus told His disciples that He would build His church, so first of all the church belongs to Jesus. Through His death and resurrection the church of believers in Jesus was established.

... there should be no division in the body (the church) but its parts have equal concern for each other. If one part suffers every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it. Now you are the body of Christ and each one of you is a part of it

1 CORINTHIANS 12:25-27

There are appointed leaders to guide His people, but everyone in a particular church has a part to play and can contribute to its function. Jesus gave what we know as The Great Commission – where He told His disciples before He went into heaven that they were to make disciples (that is followers of Jesus) of every nation.

Therefore, we are expected to tell people about our faith and encourage them to put their faith in Jesus and become Christians (This is known as evangelism).

The church also cares for people. Jesus gave many examples of how we are to do this – especially those who are poor and cannot survive without help from others. There are many other examples of what the church may do as part of the caring for others.

Many charities and organisations have their roots in Christian works of mercy and caring for people in society.

Whatever the church does it should be an outward expression of what God has done inwardly in our hearts and our lives, and not something we have to do but something we want to do.

The church should be a body of believers in Jesus that works together to preach the Kingdom of God, love the poor, and heal the sick. It's also there to see people delivered from darkness by showing the love of God within the community of believers, and within the community in which they live, and into the wider world

His (God the Father) intent is that through the church the multi-faceted wisdom of God in all its countless aspects might now be made known

EPHESIANS 3:10
(AMPLIFIED VERSION)

NOTES