



DIGGING DEEPER

WEEK 3

Defining Church

As we delve into Paul's first letter written to the church at Corinth, we get a glimpse into the early years of the church. In many ways their practices seem foreign to us, but some of their issues hit close to home. In modern vernacular, we often refer to the church as a building or an event. "Get ready for church," we say, or, "We are going to stop by the church." It's the place for worship, weddings, and funerals. We gather there to sing songs, hear a message, give of our resources, serve, and connect. In order to define what church is, we must first define what it is not.

The church is not a building. The early Christians met in homes, gathering in groups of around thirty to fifty people.

The church is not an event. Though the church gathers to worship regularly, it is much more than a worship service. First Corinthians is one of the few biblical books that gives a little insight into what the early church actually did when they met. According to 1 Corinthians they were to do things that would strengthen everyone present, such as sing, teach, and share revelations from God. In 1 Corinthians 16:2 we learn that they were to set aside a portion of their money on the first day of each week for an offering. These are not prescriptive passages, mandating that all church gatherings must include these elements; rather, they are descriptive passages, conveying some of the things that occurred when a body of believers met as a church.

The church is not a business. It is true that local churches must manage their staff and budgets, but a church is meant to be a living organism rather than an organization. Paul used the human body as an analogy of how the church is to function (see Romans 12:4-5 and 1 Corinthians 12:12, 18, 27). The church is also called the bride of Christ (2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:25-32).

So, what exactly is a church? When Paul addressed his letter to the church at Corinth, the Greek word he used is *ekklesia*, which means “a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly.”¹ Theologians refer to the study of the church as *ecclesiology*. So, the church refers to people. Historically, the church was seen as beginning with the Apostle Peter and continuing in apostolic succession (being transmitted from the apostles through successive church leaders)—with the church viewed as the gatekeeper of grace and truth.

After the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century, the church splintered into denominational factions with distinct labels. In the modern church era there is a movement among some branches of the church away from historical roots and labels of ecclesiology.

Labels used to inform ecclesiology. In other words, we used to know the gist of a congregation’s beliefs and practice based on the denominational label. Though that is still true in a general sense among denominations, today we are seeing more diversity of practice and belief among churches within the same denomination. In the last few decades, many churches have dropped or moved away from denominational labels to allow for more flexibility and foster a generic impression. Ferris Avenue Baptist Church becomes The Avenue, Grace Brethren Church becomes Grace Church, Christ United Methodist Church becomes simply Christ Church. Similarly, many church plants choose inviting generic names such as Access, Encounter, or Movement Church. The idea is not to mislead people or even to abandon denominational affiliations—though some have done so—but to emphasize our common faith foundation rather than our distinctions. Without a label, ecclesiology cannot be as easily ascertained.

If church is an assembly of people meeting together, does that mean that if I attend an independent Bible study or a campus ministry, I am involved in church? Jesus said in Matthew 18:20, “For where two or three gather together as my followers, I am there among them.” However, as we look at the whole of Scripture, we see that although Jesus is there when two or three gather, not every gathering of two or three is a church meeting.

We must remember that when the word *ekklesia* is used in Scripture, it can refer to two different things:

- **The church universal** – this includes all Christ-followers across the planet. Scripture employs the metaphors of a bride and body to illustrate the church’s relationship to Christ. Both are living organisms rather than organizations. (See 2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18)
- **The local church** – this includes local bodies of believers. Through Paul’s letters to various churches we find that there were local bodies of believers that had leadership and met together regularly. (See 1 Thessalonians 1; 1 Corinthians 4:17; 2 Corinthians 11:8)

Christianity is not a one-person sport. We were designed to live in community with other believers committed to the mission God entrusted to the church. So what delineates

an actual church, as opposed to a group of Christ-followers who assemble together? We find some marks that distinguish the church in Scripture. Though scholars have differing opinions about these marks, some common threads include the following:

- **Community expressions of worship** – singing, giving, serving one another with spiritual gifts, and so on. (1 Corinthians 12:7; 14:15; 2 Corinthians 8:3-7; Ephesians 5:19; Colossians 3:16)
- **Preaching and teaching of the Word of God** (Acts 2:14-41; 13:16-47; 1 Corinthians 14:4)
- **Biblical leadership** (Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 4:14; 5:17; Titus 1:5-9; James 5:14)
- **The practice of sacraments/ordinances** – Lord’s Supper/Baptism (Acts 2:37-40; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34)
- **An accountable community** – church discipline, providing for those with needs (Matthew 18:15-17; Acts 6:1-4; Romans 15:26; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15)
- **Discipleship processes to help people mature in faith** (1 Corinthians 4:16; 11:1; Ephesians 4:15; Philippians 4:9; Hebrews 13:7; 2 Peter 1:8-10; 3:18)
- **A gospel mission to help others hear God’s message** (Matthew 28:18-20)

As we seek to understand who we are as part of God’s church, we realize that God has called us to assemble with others to fulfill His mission. As messy and broken as the church may be, it is the vehicle the Lord has chosen to spread His gospel message.

The church is a place for the broken to gather with others who are seeking God. Jesus said in Luke 5:32, “I have come to call not those who think they are righteous, but those who know they are sinners and need to repent.” God calls us to come together for worship and teaching not only for our own benefit but also so that we can serve others. Hebrews 10:25 reminds us, “And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.”

Though we may have past church wounds, we can look for a place to gather with God’s broken people to accomplish His mission. We are not to approach church as consumers but as servants of Christ. I cannot imagine following Jesus without the church family I am privileged to walk alongside. It’s not always easy, but God calls us as His bride to learn to live love in the context of His church.

1. *Ekklesia*, Strong’s Concordance 1577, <http://www.biblestudytools.com/lexicons/greek/kjv/ekklesia.html>.