

Aug 12, 2017

Matthew 16:18

What We Believe: The Church

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What is the church? Have you ever asked that question. I want you to imagine two college friends getting lunch together, Matt and Ben. In college, they both volunteered in Intervaristy, a Christian ministry to students, so they've always known each other as strong Christian friends. Now, five years later, they're sitting outside on the deck of a small café, Matt prays for their meal, and they begin to chat about their lives.

As they dig in, Matt tells Ben about his church, how he loves the **worship**, and **teaching**, and being a part of a **community** of believers who challenge him to grow in faith. Then Ben says, "I have all those, I just don't go to church." Ben tells Matt he joined a ministry that provides solid Bible teaching, worship, and community, so he feels he doesn't need to be a part of the "institutional church." The church is the people, not the building, right? So why go to church?

Who is right? Is Matt and his love for the institutional church a good thing or has Ben found a better way? Today, I'm explaining **what** the church is and why it **matters**. If I were a part of this conversation with Matt and Ben, I think it would be helpful to define the difference between the universal church and the local church, because what Ben is really saying is that participation in the universal church is enough.

The universal Church is the people of God from all times and places.

This is what we call the **big "C" Church**, the **worldwide** or **invisible** church. It's "invisible" because it doesn't have a mailbox or sanctuary, and even if you fit every Christian you know or have heard of in one room, this would only be a tiny speck of the universal church. Our articles of faith define it this way:

The Church: (10) We believe in the universal church, a living spiritual body of which Christ is the head, and of which all people (past, present, and future) who put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior are members.

The first time the Greek word for church (*ekklesia*) is used in the NT, it refers to the universal church.

And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church (*ekklesia*), and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. **Matthew 16:18**

The church Jesus is talking about is all the people who are going to become Christians as a result of the **ministry** and **message** of Peter and the other early Christian leaders, the Apostles. The universal church includes not just converts in the New Testament, but you and me today. We're part of this church.

What is required for entrance into this universal church? Our article says anyone "who put[s] their faith and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior are members." This includes anyone in the **Old Testament** who put their trust in the coming Messiah. They looked **forward** in faith yesterday while we look **backward** in faith today.

The **Matt** of my imagination, and the Matthew of the New Testament, the one who was a tax collector and became a disciple of Jesus, though separated by **2,000 years**, are both a part of the same universal church because they have each confessed their sins and put their faith and trust in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. To become a Christian means to join the universal church. If you've never done that, I want to encourage you to join the universal church today. **Confess** your sins. Put your **faith** in **Christ**, and join.

All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.

Our article of faith also uses the **analogy** of a **body and head** to explain Christ and the church. **Ephesians** tells us Christ is the head of the church body (Eph 1:22-23). As the head, Christ has **authority** over all Christians, and **leads** and **guides** all believers from all times and places—the universal **invisible body**.

It's a bit weird to call a body invisible, isn't it? Paul actually talks about the body of Christ in **1 Corinthians 12**, and when he does, he speaks of the local church at Corinth. *The local church is the visible manifestation of the invisible church.* The little “c” church, with its mailboxes, sanctuary, and people from a particular city make visible the invisible. The Bible **encourages** individual believers to join the visible local church.

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. (NLT) **Hebrews 10:25**

Ben, in our illustration, is only a part of the invisible church. That actually makes him an **invisible Christian**. Now I have not watched the **movie** or read the **book**, but I know the general plot line of the *The Invisible Man*. In the story, a scientist discovers the formula for invisibility, and tries it on himself. At first, it feels like a superpower, but it actually leads to alienation, anger, and eventually death. At first, separation from the local church feels good, “I’m finally free!” But over time, we begin to feel more justified and the church begins to look worse and worse. Eventually we stand in judgment over the local church. Another analogy the Bible uses for the church is **the bride of Christ** (Eph 5:25). Do you think Matt would maintain his friendship with Ben if Ben kept telling Matt how ugly, dumb, and untrustworthy his bride is? *Alienation from the bride leads to alienation from the groom.*

If **Ben** were here, he would say his critique of the local church is valid because there are many institutional churches that aren't functioning as they should. That's true. Many struggle with what it means to be a local church, so let's define it. *In review, the universal Church is the people of God from all times and places.*

The local church is the regular gathering of the people of God in a specific time and location, who covenant together under Biblical teaching, leadership, and the ordinances, with a mission to share Jesus with others.

I wrote this definition based on several other definitions I read, my understanding of the local church in the Bible, and (I pray) the leading of the Holy Spirit. This local church definition is similar to our Article's.

The Church: (11) We believe in the local church, believers in Jesus Christ who assemble locally under biblical leadership for the purpose of worship, teaching and equipping Christians for the work of God, and fellowship all to the glory of God.

Before I jump into the heart of this definition, I want to highlight the “**regular gathering**” of the people in the church. This is a continuation of the theme of the invisible church becoming visible. Paul assumes the regular gathering of church people.

In the first place, I hear that when you come together as a church, there are divisions among you, and to some extent I believe it. **1 Corinthians 11:18**

Notice it doesn't say, “**If** you come together” but “**when** you come together.” Paul also says there is power when Christians gather together to be the local church.

So when you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present, **1 Corinthians 5:4**

Paul expects regular, consistent, church attendance, and when Christians gather, he expects the power of Jesus Christ be there. This is why I, I hope Ben, and I definitely hope you, will make being a part of the local church a top priority. If it's not, it makes it difficult to actually be the church.

Let's go back to our definition. As I read the Bible, I see five primary markers (or signs) that define and distinguish the local church from the universal church, but also para-church ministries or just getting together with Christian friends. The **five marks of the local church** begin with a commitment.

1. Covenanting together

In order to become a local church, the people of God need to make a commitment to each other and God. We call this making a covenant. A covenant is "A promise where God is involved." Written church covenants didn't come into use until the **16th and 17th centuries** by **Congregationalists** and **Baptists**. You're not going to find a Bible verse that says, "You must have a church covenant." But if we look at the broad story of Scripture, we see covenants everywhere.

- In **Genesis 15**, God made a covenant to **Abraham** and his spiritual descendants to be their God.
- God made a covenant with **Israel** at Sinai, and in **Jeremiah 31** he promised to make a **new covenant**.
- In **Luke 22**, **Jesus** instituted that **new covenant** at the Last Supper before he went to the **cross**.

When we covenant together, and with God, we're reflecting a little bit of the good promises God makes to us. At Cornerstone, we have a **written covenant** the members of our church promise to keep, and even sign their names to. We sign this covenant as part of our **membership process**.

The Elders are reading *Church Membership: How The World Knows Who Represents Jesus* by Jonathan Leeman. As we discussed this book, John shared how the idea of a **marriage ceremony** helps him understand covenanting together in membership. Why do we go through the ceremony? Because we recognize how big and important this moment is, and want to make this commitment to our loved one before God and others for them to help hold us accountable. Now I don't believe signing your church covenant is the same as signing your marriage license. Marriage should never be broken while God may sometimes call us to new ministries or towns, taking us away from our church. However, the idea of solemnizing the relationship is the same. *We commit to each other and God through a covenant, which is the first mark.*

2. Biblical teaching

The next mark is Biblical teaching, or orthodoxy. **Orthodoxy** is the passing along of the true Christian faith from **Jesus** and the **Apostles** through the ages. We see this in the early church.

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

The Apostles were those who sat under the direct teaching of Jesus. They had a special authority to teach the church what to believe. Notice how the church devotes itself to true teaching within the "fellowship" (a covenant community relationship).

As a **church**, we want to know God's word. We do this by teaching our kids the Bible in Cornerstone Kids, by helping our teenagers learn and apply the Bible in a youth Bible study, and by listening to a sermon every week that explains and applies the Scriptures to our lives. As **individuals**, we strengthen the Biblical teaching of the church when we read and study the Bible for ourselves. If you've never read the whole Bible, or it's been years since you've done so, I challenge you to read the whole Bible in the next **12-24 months**.

3. Biblical leadership

During our first Elders meeting, we discussed **Acts 6:1-7**, which is the story of needs arising in the early church. Some widows were being neglected in the church's daily **food distribution**, and the Apostles realized that although it was very important for them to be taken care of, they shouldn't be the ones to do it.

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word." (2-4)

In this passage, we see the **pattern** laid down for Elders and Deacons. 1 Timothy 3 lists Overseers (who we believe to be Elders) and Deacons as the two church offices the local church should have. At Cornerstone, we sum-up the calling of both offices this way.

- Elders lead and shepherd the church and devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.
- Deacons serve by meeting the physical and material needs of the church.

As the Pastor of this church, I'm also an Elder, but I'm considered the primary preaching and teaching Elder of the church. We don't believe in one Elder, but a plurality of Elders. *Biblical leadership is the third mark.*

4. Ordinances

The fourth mark of a church brings us to the next line in our **Articles of Faith**:

The Church: (12) We believe in observing the ordinances of the Lord's Supper (communion) and baptism. Our church practices baptism after confession of faith.

An ordinance is a **command**. You know how some **towns** have **ordinances** that distinguish them from other towns (aka. dry town), the church has ordinances that distinguish it.

A. Baptism

Cornerstone practices baptism **after confession of faith**. In **Acts 2:38**, the Apostle Peter told the some of the first converts to Christianity, "Repent and be baptized." When we're baptized, we go under the water and come back up again. This symbolizes our death and resurrection with Jesus (Rom 6:1-4).

If you have not been baptized after confession of faith, I'd like to challenge you to come talk to me about getting baptized. I'd love to walk you through our baptism class after church sometime soon. Did you know we have a baptism coming up on **September 30th**? If you're interested, it's not too late to obey Jesus' command to be baptized. *It's a visible sign that you're a part of the visible and invisible church.*

B. Communion

The other command Jesus gave his disciples is the regular taking of the Lord's Supper, the bread and cup as a reminder of his body and blood broken for us. Jesus said, "Do this in remembrance of me." At Cornerstone, we open communion up to any Christian. So you only have to be a part of the **universal church** in order to take communion at our local church, but we believe communion is a ultimately **sign of the local church**. When Paul wrote the words of institution in 1 Corinthians 11, which we read almost every time we take communion, he wrote them to a local church, the church at **Corinth**. If you are a Christian who doesn't take communion, you're missing out on what it means to be a part of the local church. If that's you, for any reason, please come talk to me. *Both baptism and communion are ordinances and marks of the local church.*

5. Mission

The last mark of the local church we see in the last line of my definition. A local church has a “mission to share the message of Jesus.” After his resurrection, Jesus gave his disciples the **Great Commission**. The heart of the Great Commission is these words, “Go and make disciples.” Part of being a local church is having a mission to reach the lost with the gospel. Without a mission, we become stagnant, self-focused, and closed off. But with a mission, we’re not just an organization or an institution, but a living-active-breathing body that is seeking to follow Jesus together through the power of the Holy Spirit. I want to give you two ways we can apply this last part of our definition of the local church:

- A. First, we have a **Big Day** coming up on **Saturday, September 9th**. A Big Day is when we all get out of our comfort zone to invite a neighbor, friend, or coworker to church. I preach an easy-to-understand sermon, the worship and welcome teams be extra mindful of newcomers, and we all see what God does. On September 9th, we’re kicking off a new series called “**Discipleship 101**”—which is a great opportunity to learn what it means to be a follower of Jesus. When I was at the CCCC’s conference in July, I spoke to the Pastor of a church in Vermont. He shared that one week he challenged everyone to “Bring one friend,” and everyone actually did, and those friends kept coming back after that. In the space of one week, they grew from a church of 40 to 75, and now they’re 100-115. Let’s give it a try!
- B. Second, our next two statements in our Articles of Faith clearly talk about the mission of the church. Our leadership has invited a real-life missionary, **Thierry Mirone**, to come and preach on *The Mission of the Church* **next Saturday**. He’s one of Immanuel Church’s missionaries, and is someone we’ve given two one-time donations to as we continue to figure out our missions program. I hope you’ll make it a priority to be here. He’s even going to speak in French with a translator. You’re not going to want to miss this!

In review: *The local church is the regular gathering of the people of God in a specific time and location, who covenant together under Biblical teaching, leadership, and the ordinances, with a mission to share Jesus with others.* My closing challenge to you is to love the local church.

Love the local church.

In some ways, Ben is right. The church isn’t a **building**, it’s the **people**. If I were at that café with Matt and Ben, I would encourage Ben to not give up on the local church because we shouldn’t give up on the people. It’s **easier to love the invisible church** just like it’s easier to love the people we create in our minds to compare with our **flesh and blood** family and friends. But God isn’t interested in **imaginary people**, he’s interested in the flesh and blood people that make up his local churches. Local churches are full of messed up broken people (the Pastor is the worst one of all), but it’s full of people Jesus died to turn into a **beautiful bride** who he will love and cherish for all eternity. ***Love the local church.***

Pastor Jonathan Romig wrote and preached this message for the people of Cornerstone Congregational Church. [Click here to listen to more sermons](#) or [click here to read our story](#).