

LESSON ESSENTIALS

THE CHURCH AND WORSHIP

LESSON 1: MEETING TOGETHER: WHO, WHAT, WHERE?

What do you mean when you say that you 'belong to a church'? Do you mean that you attend a particular building one day a week for religious ceremonies or do you mean something more than that? The Word of God teaches that the Church, or the Body of Christ, is truly the followers of Christ, not the building in which they meet.

If it is the true followers of Christ that make up the universal Church, then is every gathering of believers a church service? What makes a 'true church' and what should those believers do when they gather?

Matthew 18:20 says, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

What defines a true church gathering?

Certainly it cannot be dependent on how many people are gathering or on the type of building they are gathering in. And certainly we cannot assume that every meeting of followers of Christ is ‘church’ otherwise a family supper would be church as would a staff meeting at a Christian business.

There is a wonderful, much-quoted verse in the book of Matthew that speaks about followers of Jesus meeting together. Verse 18:20 says, “For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.” What a rich promise to hold onto! When only a few true followers of Jesus gather, his presence is with them!

However, can we call that small gathering ‘church’? What defines a true church gathering?

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Historically speaking, there has been a description, or a definition, of the ‘true church.’ Commonly accepted, the following evidences must be present as marks of a true church —the pure preaching of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and biblical church discipline. To clarify these three marks, one could summarize by saying that the true church is a body of believers that is governed by the Word of God, and that functions according to the Word of God, not to the wisdom of man.

Perhaps it is more helpful to discern a true church by considering a false church. The historical creed, the Belgic Confession, explains: “As for the false Church, it ascribes more power and authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God, and will not submit itself to the yoke of Christ. Neither does it administer the sacraments as appointed by Christ in His Word, but adds to and takes from, as it thinks proper; it relies more upon men than upon Christ; and persecutes those who live holily according to the Word of God and rebuke it for its errors, covetousness, and idolatry” (BC, Art. 29).

Additionally, it is helpful to examine scripture and to note how the first church (the church in the book of Acts) functioned. While some of the details of their meeting were specific to their circumstances and location, it is still helpful to consider the how they spent their time together as a church and how they served together.

1. They gathered on the first day of the week – Sunday (Acts 20:7, 1 Corinthians 16:1-2).
2. They read and taught the Word of God (Acts 11:25-57, Acts 17:11, Acts 2:42).

3. They partook of Communion (1 Corinthians 11:17-33).
4. They sang songs (Colossians 3:16, Ephesians 5:19).
5. They prayed (Acts 1:14, Acts 12:5, Acts 12:12).
6. They gave what they had to the work of the church (Acts 2:44-45, Acts 4:32-35).
7. They used their spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:24-26, Romans 12:4-5).
8. They cared for those in need (Acts 6:1-6, Acts 2:45, Acts 4:34, 1 Timothy 5:16).
9. They shared the Gospel (2 Corinthians 8:18, Acts 5:42, 2 Corinthians 10:15-16).

While it may be impossible for you and the believers near you to gather on the first day of the week, it is still crucial that you commune together as regularly as possible. And it is likely that the caring for those in need that the church did extended well beyond only that once-a-week meeting. Still, it is a function of the church to preach the gospel with words, but also with caring actions to those both in and outside of the church body.

As you consider the group of believers that you are connected to, consider how you might implement these marks of a true church and these early church examples into your church life.

Unfortunately, the Word of God also teaches us that in every church gathering there are 'sheep' (true believers) and 'wolves' (not true believers). Most often we cannot discern who is who. Praise the Lord that we can rest assured that the Lord, our Good Shepherd, knows His sheep (John 10). He knows those who are His and will call those who are not to account for their deceit. In the meantime, we ought to know what the Word of God says about preaching the pure gospel, about the sacraments, and about church discipline, and we ought to strive to be people who wholeheartedly seek to be governed by His precepts and motivated by His grace, regardless of the potential 'wolves' in our midst.

Finally, there is great hope and peace in the certainty of His Church. No matter what the enemy of our Lord would try to discourage us with, no matter the persecution or distress, our Lord Jesus says that upon the rock of His victory on the cross He will build His Church, and all the powers of hell will not be able to prevail against it (Matthew 16:18). The eternal Church of our Lord is secure! Rejoice!

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IN REVIEW

- The Marks of a True Church —the pure preaching of the gospel, the pure administration of the sacraments, and biblical church discipline.
- The true church is a body of believers that is governed by the Word of God, and that functions according to the Word of God.
- The Lord Jesus is the Good Shepherd who knows His sheep; that is, He knows who is truly His Church and will not be deceived by the ‘wolves’ among us.
- The Lord Jesus has built His Church on the sure foundation of His work on the cross and nothing can shake it!

HAVE YOUR SAY

- Spend some time considering the gathering of believers of which you are a part. Are you functioning as a true church? Can you identify ways that you are failing to function as a true church? Pray for wisdom to know how to implement the marks of a true church, and act on it.

- Who are 'wolves' that attack the 'sheep' of God? What threats does your church face? Pray that the Lord would protect your church from the 'wolves.' Pray for wholehearted, likeminded followers of Christ to join your church and to advance the gospel together.

- What will Jesus do to preserve the Church? Why can we trust in his unending love and protection? Rejoice in the firm foundation that the universal Church has: the accomplished work of Christ on the cross is our surety and our confidence. Praise Him for His victory that enables us to serve and live as His body, the Church.

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