

Basic Christianity
From An Urban Perspective Unit 2
Week 5: What Is the Church?

Common misconceptions

When you ask most people "what is a church?" they point to a *building*. That's the way we think about church. Sometimes the building is referred to as God's house, or even a temple. So people talk about "going to church." People think church buildings are special, as if God lives there. They talk differently "in Church," dress differently and act differently. **One consequence of this is that most people think if they're going to a Church, then they're *Christians*.** "Of course I'm a Christian, I've been a member of St. James all of my life."

Many people are actually offended by the suggestion that attending church does not make you a Christian, and that being a church has nothing to do with bricks and mortar. Let's consider what the Bible teaches.

New Testament meaning of "ekklesia"

The word for "church" in the New Testament is ekklesia. This Greek word means "the *called out ones*," or "the *assembly*." So clearly, the church is not a building, but a group of people. There are **other descriptions of the church** that also fill out the biblical view. We are called "**the body of Christ**" (Eph. 1:22, 23; 1 Corinthians 12:13), "**household of God**" (Eph. 2:19), "**kingdom of God's beloved Son**" (Col. 1:13), "**people of God**" (1 Peter 2:19).

How did the church begin?

The church began after Jesus left to be with the Father. His followers were gathered together for prayer and the *Holy Spirit* came and lived inside them. They continued to meet together to *pray, study the Bible, and fellowship* with each other. Over time, the church grew and spread and our group of Christians here today is a result of that first gathering of Christians in Acts.

The church is a community that is...

A. Inclusive

Even though humanity is divided along racial, gender and economic lines, it shouldn't be this way in the church.

(Galatians 3:28) "There is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male and female. For you are all one in Christ Jesus."

What a radical message this is. The Bible urges husbands to love their wives, masters to free their slaves, the rich to fellowship with the poor.

B. Loving

"So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. 35 Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples." – John 13:34-35

More than anything else, New Testament believers were to love one another. This is no mere sentiment either. It means offering informed counsel, encouragement, exhortation, practical service, etc.

Read 1 John 3:16-19.

C. On a mission

The whole dynamic of Christian community was revolutionary. But the church exists for a reason. Without clear understanding of the church's role in the world, it loses its power.

The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 5:14-20).

This is why there is a church. We have a charter, a mission. God has called us to reach the world with the liberating message of grace in Christ. That means that we need to orient our community life around our mission.

D. Culturally engaged

Jesus did not want his followers to hide from the world. He told them to be in the world, but not of it.

“I’m not asking you to take them out of the world, but to keep them safe from the evil one.” – John 17:15

This means we love sinners and build relationships, just like Jesus did during his ministry.

“When I wrote to you before, I told you not to associate with people who indulge in sexual sin.¹⁰ But I wasn’t talking about unbelievers who indulge in sexual sin, or are greedy, or cheat people, or worship idols. You would have to leave this world to avoid people like that.” – 1 Corinthians 5:9, 10

We don’t embrace the values of non-Christians, but we do everything we can to relate to them in a way they can understand. (1 Corinthians 9:19-27)

What is my role in the church?

God has a unique role for *each person* to play in the church.

Discussion: Ask people if they feel like they have a role to play. Do they feel needed? Do they think they have something to offer other people?

Note to the instructor: Include a personal example here of what your role was when you first started going to church and how it has changed over time.

Read **Ephesians 2:10**.

“A spiritual gift is given to each of us so we can help each other. 8 To one person the Spirit gives the ability to give wise advice; to another the same Spirit gives a message of special knowledge. 9 The same Spirit gives great faith to another, and to someone else the one Spirit gives the gift of healing.10 He gives one person the power to perform miracles, and another the ability to prophesy. He gives someone else the ability to discern whether a message is from the Spirit of God or from another spirit. Still another person is given the ability to speak in unknown languages, while another is given the ability to interpret what is being said. 11 It is the one and only Spirit who distributes all these gifts. He alone decides which gift each person should have. – 1 Corinthians 12:8-11

Gifts are given for the common good (v.7). You'll find your area of gifting as you step out in service.

Everyone (including *you*) is needed in the church. Paul uses the example of how the parts of our body depend on each other to live to explain how we need each other.

Read 1 Corinthians 12:14-27.

Memory Verse: Galatians 3:28