

September 10, 2017
The Fellowship of the Church: Who We Are
Acts 2:32-47

Who do you say Jesus is? When Jesus asked His disciples this question, they had all sorts of interesting answers: a prophet, a great teacher, a godly man. Simon Peter answered, **"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."** Jesus replied, *"Blessed are you, Simon ... (for this was revealed to you) by my Father in heaven ... And on this rock I will build **my church**, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it"* (Matthew 16:13-18). Jesus did not say He would build a building, establish a service club, start a sports team, or found a political party. He said He would build a **"church."** The word Jesus chooses is a word meaning "called out" or "called together people" (Greek *ekklesia*).

Fifty days after Jesus' death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit comes in power on the disciples, Peter preaches an amazing sermon, and 3000 people came to faith (Acts 2). Immediately these people "devote themselves" (implying passionate commitment) to Jesus and to **church**, to being God's called out and called together people. They are devoted to

1. the apostles' teaching
2. fellowship
3. the breaking of bread
4. prayer
5. they sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.

Who (not what) is the church?

What we see through the New Testament is that

1. ***The church is God's idea.*** The church is not a human invention. The church is, in fact, the first act of creation in the new Kingdom established by Jesus.

Most of the New Testament is about church – God's gift to spread the good news about Jesus through ordinary people. The New Testament is not the story of lone ranger Christians doing their own thing, cultivating their own spirituality, or hiding away from all dangers. It's about followers of Jesus – in community, in the church – being God's people, boldly taking on God's mission of sharing the good news, together. It's about the people of Jesus taking His love, mercy, grace, forgiveness, hope, and healing in Word – and in deed – into the world.

Peter says, *"you (plural – the church) are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you (plural) may declare the praises of him who called you (plural) out of darkness into his wonderful light"* (1 Peter 2:9). We are God's people, on His mission so others find their way from darkness to light.

2. ***You can't separate being a Christian from church any more than you can***

separate being a person from being human. Some members of the human race may disappoint you, embarrass you, even disgust you, but they are still fellow human beings. Part and parcel of believing in Jesus is being part of His people, the church. Some members of the church may disappoint you, embarrass you, or even disgust you, too, but we're all in this together. You may not like that, but that's the consistent message of the New Testament.

Peter uses the image of bricks in a wall: "*Like living stones, (you) are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood*" (1 Peter 2:5). The thing about a wall is, you need every brick. No stone is unnecessary. Not every stone likes every other stone, but, you must work together. A stone off by itself is useless.

3. ***Church is not something you go to. It's someone you are.*** As a Christian, you are part of the church, the community/fellowship of other believers. The common theme in the New Testament is church is not a "what" – a thing out there – it is a "who" – a community of people who believe in Jesus, learn together, worship together, love together, pray together, serve together, and are on a mission together – to bring God's love, mercy, and grace to our broken, hurting world.

In J.R.R. Tolkien's epic, *The Lord of the Rings*, there is a "fellowship of the ring" – a group of cast-offs, strong-characters-with-fatal-flaws, people-who-don't-really-like-one-another, and people-too-weak-to-amount-to-much. And this unlikely fellowship of odds and sods, together – using their various gifts, strengths, and abilities – destroy the Dark Lord and establish a whole new order. There is no one hero.

The church is just as unlikely a "fellowship of the Lord." But together, using our various gifts, strengths, and abilities, we can overcome darkness with light and help establish God's Kingdom in our community and around the world as well.

4. ***Church is messy.*** The church is still people. People – saved by Jesus – still struggle with selfishness, pride, anger, and all those not-so-good things. People sin. Leaders mess up. The Bible is not a story of an idealized church where everything works perfectly all the time. Paul and Peter argue. Paul gets angry with Mark and stomps off. Wealthier Christians don't want to help poorer Christians.

Amazingly, God uses real people – like you and me – to build His Kingdom. A story goes that when Jesus ascended to heaven after the resurrection an angel asked him what was to happen next. Jesus said He had left a dozen or so humans with the task of continuing the work He had started. The angel asked who these humans were and what they were like. Jesus told the angel about Peter and his temper, Thomas and his doubts, two brothers named James and John who were always fighting, Matthew the tax collector, and the rest. These people, Jesus said, would continue His mission. The angel was quiet for a moment. Then he said to Jesus, "And what is your backup plan?" Guess what? There is still no back up plan. There's just us (empowered, led, and inspired by God's Spirit!!!)

5. ***In the Church, we need each other.*** Jesus' vision for the church – God's people, called out, called together, on Jesus' mission to share His good news of forgiveness, love, mercy, justice, peace, hope, and grace – unites us across racial lines, generational lines, gender lines, educational lines, social status lines, ability lines ... The church is people from ALL nations coming together around a cause so much bigger than any one country, ethnic group, or demographic: the Kingdom of God. John's vision of worship in heaven is of people from EVERY tribe and EVERY nation – men and women – together, worshipping and serving God.

So, if we are going to be the church, we need to get over our racial prejudices, our political agendas, and our personal preferences and centre ourselves on God, and God alone. What unites us is a bond of blood – not common DNA, but the blood of Jesus shed for us on the cross. What unites us is a common identity – we share, in common, the image of God; we are redeemed, together, by the body and blood of God's own Son; and we are, all, empowered by the Spirit of God within us. What unite us are far more important than the things that divide us.

We face challenges. In this messed up world, we desperately need one another!

But ... I don't like Church.

That sounds good, but ... there have been times in my life when I have been ticked off at the church. I have been hurt by the church. I have been disillusioned by the church.

Actually, the church didn't do that. "The church" is not a personal being that can do things to me. The church is ***people***. ***People*** can do all sorts of nasty things. There have been times when I've been ticked off by ***people*** in the church, when I have been hurt by ***people*** in the church, and when I have been disappointed by ***people*** in the church.

People – even people in church, loved by God, saved by Jesus, empowered by His Spirit – still do dumb things, selfish things, hurtful things, wrong things, even downright evil things.

Of course, it is safer to blame "the church" for things.

- When I'm not growing spiritually, if it's "the church's" fault, I don't have to take any responsibility. It's not my problem. "The church" has failed me.
- When it's "the church" that is boring, irrelevant, out of touch, or in need of help, I don't have to be part of the solution – "the church" can deal with it.
- When "the church" has hurt me or let me down, I can write off the whole kit-and-kaboodle. I don't have to deal with the fact that individual people in the family of God are still sinful, still struggling, still in need of my grace and forgiveness. I don't have to wrestle with Jesus' uncomfortable instructions to forgive a person seventy times seven times ... "The church" is the problem, not people I have to deal with.

When “the church” doesn’t look or act like Jesus would act, I can neatly write it off and walk away. I don’t need to deal with the awkward reality that – like it or not – I might be part of the church. But if we – all together – are the church. And if we – all together – have issues, we – all together – need to deal with it. Jesus never walked away from His church, His people. He set out to build us up. Who do I think I am that I can walk away?

If “the church” has issues (and we do!) – if I don’t “like” Church – I am as much a part of the problem as anyone else. I love Jesus. I want to do what pleases and honours Jesus, but I often blow it, too. I can say and do hurtful things. I can fail to do or say what is right and good. If I am honest, there have been times when I have been the one ticking people off, hurting others, and letting other people down.

If “the church” has issues (and we do!), I am as much a part of the solution as anyone else, too. Walking away helps no one. It doesn’t help the family of God in this place – we need all the wisdom, help, energy, and enthusiasm we can get. It doesn’t help the larger kingdom of God; we have a BIG mission that needs us all. And it doesn’t even help me – I grow in maturity, character, and ability as I put my shoulder to the wheel and help out. And, like it or not, I need this community of people, with all our warts and wrinkles.

*“On this rock (Peter’s confession of faith in Jesus), I will build **my church**,”* says Jesus. Jesus creates the fellowship of the church. The church is us – people who love, put our faith in, and desire to follow Jesus. We are not perfect people. We are people who work together, grow together, learn together, worship together, serve together, care together, confess together, forgive together, and share the love of God together. We are people becoming more and more like Jesus, together – but we have a long, long way to go.

“And the gates of Hades will not overcome it,” promises Jesus. This is not our church – it’s Jesus’ church (more about that next week). He will build His church. His Spirit will guide, empower, inspire, equip, and bless His people. Nothing and no one can overcome us.

The legacy of church history is people and powers have tried to eradicate the church. They have failed; the people of God emerged stronger from persecution in the early centuries, in China, and in the former Soviet Union that ever before. The legacy of church history is corruption inside has almost rotted the church from the inside out – but people of Jesus courageously put their noses to the grindstone and helped purify and rebuild His church.

Church is not something you go to. It’s someone you are – who WE are. It’s who Jesus created US to be. Are we going to be His church? Am I going to be His church? Are you going to be His church? What will that look like? How can I be a part of this amazing, frustrating, incredible, annoying, exciting reality Jesus is building in His world?