



What is the Church?

By Paul O'Brien

There are a lot of churches and a lot of churches that do a lot of different things. So, first, and fundamentally, what is a church and what is it supposed to do *biblically*? What are the essentials? The “have to’s”? Until we understand that question we won’t be able to get to the *local* question; what *this church* should be and do.

What is the Church?

The word “church” comes from the Greek word *ekklesia* (*ek* = “out from” and *kaleo* = “to call”) and means essentially *called out ones*.¹ The church is a gathering of those called out from the world (cf. 1 Peter 2:9). The word church “usually has reference to a group of believers in a specific city. Thus we find Paul’s letters addressed the ‘the church of God in Corinth’ (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1), ‘the churches in Galatia’ (Gal. 1:2), ‘the church of the Thessalonians’ (1 Thess. 1:1).”² Yet, the Church is also universal (cf. 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 1:22; 3:10; 5:23; Col. 1:18, 24); it is not confined to one location. Wayne Grudem gives this definition, “*The Church is the community of all true believers for all time.*”³

The church is to be filled with saints; those that have been made holy in Christ. The church is a gathering of the chosen race, the royal priesthood, the holy nation, the people for God’s own possession, that it may proclaim the excellencies of Him who called it out of darkness into His marvelous light (see 1 Peter 2:9 cf. Deut. 7:6). The Church is the one that Christ loved and gave Himself for that He might make His Church holy (Eph. 5:25b-27).

There is also a lot of biblical imagery of the church that helps us conceive of what it is called to be. The church is a temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16-18; Eph. 2:21). A new humanity (Rom. 5:12-17; Eph. 2:15) that is progressively being renewed into Jesus’ image (Rom. 8:29; 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:10). It is a body where every

person, every body part, is vital. It is a body that must listen to and follow Christ who is the head (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-31; Col. 1:18). It is the household of God (1 Tim. 3:15); the bride of Christ (2 Cor. 11:2); the pillar and foundation of truth (1 Tim. 3:15).

What is the Church Supposed to Do?

What is a church supposed to do? A lot of things. This is because “The church operates in three relationships: *upward* to God in worship and glorification; *inward* to herself in edification, purification, education and discipline; *outward* to the world in evangelization and service ministries.”⁴ Thus, Mark Dever says, “The proper ends for a local congregation’s life and actions are the worship of God, the edification of the church, and the evangelization of the world.”⁵

We see from Scripture that a church as a gathering of Christians is supposed to pray (cf. 1 Thess. 5:17-18; 1 Tim. 2:1-3), praise (cf. Acts 2:46-47; Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16), confess sin (cf. James 5:16; Heb. 3:12-13), give confession of faith (cf. Rom. 10:9-10), read and study the Bible (cf. Matt. 28:20; Luke 24:27-45; 2 Tim. 2:15), listen to teaching and exhortation (cf. Acts 17:2-3, 17; 1 Tim. 4:13), celebrate the Lord’s Supper and baptism (cf. Luke 22:10-20; Matt. 26:26-28; 28:19; Acts 2:41), give offerings (Matt. 23:23; 1 Tim. 6:17-19; Phil. 4:15-17, 19), and practice loving church discipline (Ps. 94:12; Heb. 12:6; Rev. 3:19). So, we see church gatherings are very important (see also Heb. 10:24-25). Local churches should also have biblically qualified leadership. They should have regenerate church membership. That is, since they are called to be a gathering of saints, only those that are saved through Christ should be members. Fellowship should also be integral to the life of the church.

What is the Mission of the Church?

So, the church is called to do a lot of things. But what is the *mission* of the Church?⁶ What is the main task the church is supposed to be involved in? There are many great things we could do; clothe the poor, teach English, feed the homeless, have great social events, etc. But what is the absolute essential task we must do?

The Church is truly given a threefold mission; upward, inward, and outward. These three things actually work in unison. They create a helpful cyclical motion. When we worship God as we should we want to build others up in the church, we want to evangelize, and when we build others up they grow, they evangelize, people get saved, and we praise God; and so the cycle repeats in various ways as it is supposed to. So, for the Church to function as it should all three of these aspects of the church’s mission must be being carried out. So, let’s look at the Church’s mission through these three aspects.

Upward: Worship

We are called to sing songs of praise (e.g. Ps., Eph. 5:19; Col. 3:16) but we are not to stop there. We are called to love the LORD our God with all that we are; mind, body, soul, strength; everything! We are to lay our very lives upon the altar in service to the LORD (Rom. 12:1). This is the foundational thing. Upon this the other two aspects of the church’s mission is built. If this is lacking, the church will fall.

Thus, we see the huge importance of godly, sound, and worshipful preaching. If the church is to worship the LORD they must know, see, and taste the wonder of the LORD. It is to this same end that songs of worship are to be sung. They are not primarily to show the ability of vocal cords, the accomplishments of musicians, but the grandeurs of our great God and His glorious grace.

It is when the church, both individually and corporately, are crying out to the LORD in worship and having the eyes of their hearts enlightened to God's love that inward nurture and outward evangelism will flow as a perpetual fountain. Yet, without the right worship of God, attempts at nurture and evangelism will be cold. We must pray and strive to be awakened to the wonder of God, His truth, and His Grace. That is our hope and the best policy to have life in any church; we need God's Spirit!

Inward: Nurture

From Scripture we see that one of the missions of the church, one of the non-negotiables, is discipleship.⁷ The Great Commission has that title because it is the *Great Commission* (Matt. 28:19-20). It is what we are to do; be all about.

The Church has the God given task to equip the saints for the work of the ministry that they may grow up in every way into Christ (cf. Eph. 4:11-16). We strive for those we disciple to show the fruits of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), follow the Great Commandment (Mark 12:28-31), and practice the Great Commission (Matt. 28:18-20) themselves by teaching "faithful men [and women] who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). We do this for the building up of the body and the glory of God among all the nations (Rom. 1:5).

Thus, Sunday gatherings are very important because that is one of the primary ways that discipleship happens. Of course, the leadership at the church always desires to be pouring into people and we believe that everyone is called to be a disciple-maker.

Outward: Evangelism

The church is a gathering of the people of God and *all* the people of God are told to proclaim His excellencies (see 1 Peter 2:9). The main way the church proclaims God's excellencies is through the proclamation and teaching of His Word.⁸ The purpose being to make disciples that are wholly committed to Christ. However, the church is to proclaim God's truth not only when it is gathered on Sunday but also when it is scattered throughout the week.

We see here, again, the importance of the two other aspects of the mission of the church. It is when we taste of the LORD in worship that we want to tell people of the wonders of the LORD. We tell the gospel, the good news, most naturally when we are impressed with the fact that it is good news. In short, it is best when we evangelize in an overflow of worship.

Conclusion

Thus, overall, we see that:

"The Church is called to worship the LORD, nurture the congregation, and evangelize the world."

Endnotes

¹ The word for church (Gk. *ekklesia*) is used for other gatherings however (cf. Acts 19:32, 39, 41) but I think the definition here is still a good one. In Paul's "earlier writings he uses *ekklesia* mostly with reference to the gathering of the local congregation (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 2:1; Philem. 2), which usually meets in someone's home" (D.J. Tibball, "Church" in *NDBT*, 411).

² Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1042-43.

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 853.

⁴ George W. Peters, *A Biblical Theology of Missions* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1972), 209. Wayne Grudem calls these three relationships (1) Ministry to God: Worship, (2) Ministry to Believers: Nurture, and (3) Ministry to the World: Evangelism and Mercy (*Systematic Theology*, 867-68).

⁵ Mark Dever, "The Church" in *A Theology for the Church*, 809.

⁶ I found Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert's book, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission*, helpful.

⁷ "Discipling others is the process by which a Christian with a life worth emulating commits himself for an extended period of time to a few individuals who have been won to Christ, the purpose being to aid and guide their growth to maturity and equip them to reproduce themselves in a third spiritual generation" (*Successful Discipling* [Chicago, ILL: Moody Press, 1979], 31-32.).

⁸ That is how the church expands (see: Acts 6:7; 9:31; 12:24; 13:49; 16:5; 17:11-12; 19:20; Rom. 1:16).