

What Does the Church Mean to Us?

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Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. ²⁶ Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of any of you. ²⁷ For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. ²⁸ Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. **Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.** (Acts 20:25-28)

Is the fellowship of God foremost in our lives? We should **not** exhibit a lackadaisical, apathetic, relaxed, half-hearted or laidback attitude toward the Christian community. Is the local fellowship of God's people important in our commitment to Jesus as our Lord? **What does the church really mean to us? What is the purpose of the church? What does conversion to Christ mean to us?** These are questions that we must examine if we wish to be effective in reaching out to the lost and, at the same time, strengthening the saints? First of all, we can say that the church is a fellowship of individuals who proclaim Jesus as God's way of salvation. **God formed the church to be a witnessing community. The call to witness is a call that God gives out to all of us who accept Jesus as Lord.** Do we work for the cause of Christ? Do we pray that God will send forth workers to win the lost? Listen to Jesus as He addresses this problem of so few laborers within the kingdom, which comments are preceded by Matthew's observations leading up to Jesus' famous words:

Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness. ³⁶ When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. ³⁷ Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but **the workers are few.** ³⁸ Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field." (Matthew 9:35-38)

What are we doing to advance the cause of Christ? The "workers are few," says Jesus. Are we included in "workers are few"? In spite of the large number of priests and religious leaders among the various sects of Judaism, **Jesus still says that "the workers are few."** Are

we a part of the “few”? If our conversion does not issue in testimony and commitment and godly ethical behavior, then our acceptance of Christ must be looked upon with suspicion. Why do we, as Christians, avoid witnessing? Why do we shun or recoil from the Sunday gatherings of God’s people? It is not uncommon for those who profess faith in Christ to abandon or discard Sunday gatherings. Why? Is it because witnessing and commitment come at a high price—devotion to the cause of Christ and rejection of self-centeredness? **We cannot erase the mistakes of the past, but we, starting today, can renew our commitment to the cause of Christ with a great deal of fervor, passion, enthusiasm, and dedication.**

Are we sharing Jesus as God’s way of salvation? As we seek to witness, we testify to others by telling them to whom we belong—God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. We cannot be “true” Christians and avoid evangelism and dedication to Christ. Have we, as the body of Christ, forgotten the universal priesthood of all believers? Have we forgotten our purpose in life? If so, we should pay close attention to the words of Peter:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1 Peter 2:9)

Have we grasped the significance of Peter’s words? What does it mean to say that we are “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and a people belonging to God”? Is this really true of us in our thinking? **What does the church mean to us?** As believers, we must not let our witnessing be limited to a small number of professional religious leaders known as “the minister” or “clergy.” One of the greatest problems existing among many who profess faith in Christ is the sin of apathy or lack of concern—they say, just leave Christian witness and loyalty to others, especially the man in the pulpit. Another aspect of apathy or indifference has to do with our commitment to meet with the saints on Sundays. **Do we have time for everything we want to do except God?**

Sunday gatherings is a time to remember and reflect upon our status in God’s kingdom. In the assembly, we pray together, we sing songs of praise to God and songs to strengthen us in our daily walk with God. We assemble with others to be encouraged and built up in the faith. **Our gatherings should be a time to be filled, as it were, on high octane.** Are we really and truly seeking first God’s kingdom and His righteousness? Where do we stand? Are we back-seat Christians? Are we just spectators in the assembly? If we do attend the Sunday services, are we simply observers of a performance carried on by others (a select few) on a Sunday morning? **What kind of enthusiasm did the early converts to Christianity react to the Gospel message?** We should listen to Luke as he left a record of their behavior following their acceptance of the message and their baptism. For example, Luke penned the following words:

Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. ⁴²They **devoted themselves** to the apostles’ teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ⁴³Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. ⁴⁴All the believers were together and had everything in common. ⁴⁵They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. ⁴⁶**Every day** they continued to meet together in the temple courts. **They broke bread in their homes** and ate together with glad and

sincere hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:41-47)

Many claim a connection with Christ without any commitment, duty, or obligation. Do we claim a bond or relationship with Christ? If so, are we working for the advancement of His kingdom? Do we leave our Christianity up to the minister in the pulpit? **Are we not all priests of God** (1 Peter 2:9; Revelation 5:9-10)? Hopefully, none of us attend the Sunday services as just spectators to be entertained. **We attend the Sunday gatherings to be strengthened in the faith and to give honor and glory to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit so that we can go back out into the world as a task force for the proclamation of God's Good News.** Once more, do we remember the words of Peter when he wrote to the Christians in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia concerning their status in Christ? Remember, Peter penned the following words that should reawaken us to a fruitful ministry in God's kingdom:

But **you** are a **chosen** people, a **royal** priesthood, a **holy** nation, **God's special** possession, **that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.** ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9-10)

Peter addresses the whole of God's people, not just a select few. In spite of this claim of loyalty on the part of many Christians, we still witness those who profess a connection with Christ without a relationship of involvement. **Has our initial pledge, joyfulness, and ecstasy to Jesus as Lord diminished or just disappeared?** Have we lost our first love for spiritual things? Just a look at the Sunday attendance reveals how far many Christians have drifted from the first-century church. In the early church, one's attendance was extremely important. For one to be a Christian in the first century meant involvement in Christ's service of evangelism and the gathering with the saints for **instructions** and **encouragement**. Are we involved in the advancement of God's kingdom? Is the Sunday attendance a most important function in our lives? Even when the first-century church faced death for meeting together, nevertheless, they were told:

Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the **Day approaching**. (Hebrews 10:25)

“The Day approaching” in this context is not the Sunday morning gatherings. The Day approaching had to do with the passing away of the Old Covenant made with Israel and the coming in of the New Heaven and New Earth (the Christian community). In other words, the Day approaching had reference to the destruction of Judaism with its Temple and its rituals in AD 70. **Even though this date has passed, we still need to assemble with God's people in order to renew our spiritual strength.** Today, many of us fail to meet with the saints on a regular basis. Why? Is it because we have lost our zeal or passion for spiritual things? How do we view Sunday? Is it a special day for us to assemble with other believers to encourage one

another in our faith? Is it just a day to go fishing? Is it simply a day for visiting relatives? Is it a day for our own personal pleasures? Is it just a day for relaxation at the lake? The following account of Jesus' reaction to the Sabbath should register with us as we inspect our own outlook concerning the gathering of God's people on Sundays:

Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵ He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised him. ¹⁶ **He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom.** And he stood up to read. ¹⁷ The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written: ¹⁸ **"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."** (Luke 4:14-19)

What is our **custom** about Sundays? How did the early church react to their redemption? Once more, we need to reflect upon the conversion of about 3,000 on the Day of Pentecost. As stated above, Luke reports the following:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' **teaching** and to the **fellowship**, to the *breaking of bread* and to prayer....**Every day** they **continued to meet together in the temple courts**. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. (Acts 2:42, 46-47)

Have we devoted or committed ourselves to God's kingdom? Do we rejoice when we meet with God's gathered people on Sundays? Is Sunday a time of rejoicing? Every day should be a time of passion for the things of God? Sunday, normally, is the one day of the week when we pray to God as a collective body of saints and reflect upon a message from God's written Word. Sunday should be a time for us to reflect upon His Resurrection? As a collective fellowship, we give praise to God for His redemption? What does **Christ** mean to us? What does **commitment** mean to us? What does God's **love** mean to us? Are we apathetic toward spiritual things? Are we "lukewarm" or are we "hot" for kingdom things? **What kind of a church (local fellowship of God's people) would this Body of believers be if all the members were just like me?** Are we like the Christian community in Laodicea? Listen to Jesus as he addresses this church:

I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! ¹⁶ So, **because you are lukewarm**—neither **hot** nor **cold**—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. ¹⁷ You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. (Revelation 3:15-17)

THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH

But the work of the Ecclesia [“the called-out ones”] in relation to the world is itself a missionary work; and it is to the Ecclesia itself as the missionary body that Christ’s charge is ultimately addressed.¹

If we are to appreciate what the church should mean to us, we must understand the purpose of the church, that is to say the Christian community is God’s army. **The church is God’s appointed seat of His presence with men and women. We are the temple of God.** Many individuals who profess faith in God and Christ see no relevance for the Church for which Jesus died. As a result of this mindset, numerous Christians often live their lives in isolation from the Church that God ordained for the spread of His message of salvation by grace through faith in the Atonement of Christ. **It is not uncommon for individuals to identify the Church as an ecclesiastical organization rather than the fellowship of Jesus Christ or the fellowship of the Holy Spirit with the saints.** For this reason, many modern-day men and women have outgrown their need for the community of Jesus the Messiah. As we rethink our views concerning the church, we need to remember that **the church “is essentially a fellowship of persons and not an institution.”**² Since our English word *church* is so ingrained in our society, I wanted to take the time to assist us in our understanding of the biblical meaning behind the Greek word **ἐκκλησία** (*ekklēsia*).

As we seek to understand the place of the Church in the lives of God’s people, we are confronted with many questions. For instance, why did God bring into being the Church? Again, what is the purpose of God’s new community of believers? What is the Church? Is the Church visible or invisible? What constitutes the Church? Is the word *church* employed in the New Testament in the same way that many Christians today utilize the term? Is the Church simply an ecclesiastical institution? Or, is the Church in the New Testament writings the fellowship of Christian believers? Again, Emil Brunner writes: “The community cannot be an institution, a church.”³

These are questions that we ought to approach in seeking to understand what the Church is. Positively, we can declare that the Church is the fellowship of Jesus Christ? We can also

¹ Fenton John Anthony Hort, *The Christian Ecclesia: A Course of Lectures on the Early History and Early Conceptions of the Ecclesia and Four Sermons* (London; New York: Macmillan and Co., Limited; The Macmillan Company, 1897), 34. **Fenton John Anthony Hort** (1828-1892) was an Irish theologian, editor, and Bible translator and commentator. He is best known for his critical edition of *The New Testament in the Original Greek*, assembled with Brooke Westcott. The great grandson of Archbishop of Tuam Josiah Hort, F.J.A. Hort was born in Dublin in 1828. He attended Rugby School, went on to Cambridge, and became a fellow there in 1852. In 1854, he cofounded the *Journal of Classical and Sacred Philology*. In 1857, he was given the living of St. Ippolyts in Herfordshire, where he served for 15 years. In 1870, he was appointed a member of the committee for revising the King James New Testament, and in 1871 delivered his Hulsean lectures, later entitled *The Way, the Truth, the Life*. In 1878, he became Hulsean Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, and in 1887 became Lady Margaret’s Professor of Divinity. He died in 1892 in Cambridge.

² Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1952), 58. **Emil Brunner** (1889-1966, Swiss Protestant [Reformed] theologian)

³ *Ibid.*, 59.

state that the Church is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Where the Holy Spirit is, we can say, “There is the Christian communion.” Within the Body of Christ, we, as the faithful, are bound to each other through our common sharing in Christ and the Holy Spirit. In other words, the Church is simply composed of those who have a relationship with God through Christ. Within the Body of Christ, we have one thing in common, namely, God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit. The Church of the New Testament is simply the society of Christian believers who have been purchased by the blood of Christ.

The Church of Jesus is not an “it,” it is not “a thing,” nor is it an “institution.” But rather, it is a unity of persons. The Church is people, that is to say, it is a close association of individuals who have responded to Jesus as Lord in their lives. Many expressions are utilized to put across the very heart of the word *church*—the Israel of God, the seed of Abraham, the elect of God, the kingdom of God, the assembly, and so on.

Unfortunately, many Christians read into “church of the living God” (ἐκκλησία θεοῦ ζῶντος, *ekklēsia theou zōntos*) [1 Timothy 3:15] the image of the institutional church as it has developed within their own world of traditions handed down from their forefathers. Once more, Brunner is forthright in his description of the church of Jesus: “The *ekklēsia* of Jesus Christ is God’s people, the elect people—that was also the rightful description of Israel.”⁴ **The Church is fundamentally a fellowship of persons and not an institution, that is, an ecclesiastical organization.**

This study focuses upon the positive (biblical) understanding of the meaning of the English word *church*. The optimistic emphasis should enhance our appreciation for the wonder and beauty of what God brought into being through the Death of Jesus upon the Cross. What is the reason for the Church in God’s scheme of redemption? Paul expressed to Timothy the true nature of the Church and its mission. Listen to Paul as he sets forth God’s objective for His new group of people:

Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, ¹⁵ if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God’s household (οἶκῳ θεοῦ, *oikō theou*), which is the church of the living God (ἐκκλησία θεοῦ ζῶντος, *ekklēsia theou zōntos*), the **pillar** and **foundation** (ἐδραῖωμα, *hedraiōma*, “**bulwark**”) of the truth. ¹⁶ Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He^c **appeared** in a body,^d was **vindicated** by the Spirit, was **seen** by angels, was **preached** among the nations, was **believed** on in the world, was **taken up** in glory. (1 Timothy 3:14-16)

When we enter into covenant with God, we enter into the **New Covenant** who is none other than Jesus Himself (Isaiah 49:8). **This new relationship should renovate us in our day-to-day walk with God.** We can also say that the Holy Spirit renews men and women from their old ways into the newness of Christ. Our priorities as believers are different from our prior main concerns. **What mental picture do we have concerning the church?** How did Paul view the Church? He spoke of the church as “God’s household” [οἶκῳ θεοῦ, *oikō theou*] (3:15), which is

⁴Ibid., 19.

^c Some manuscripts *God*

^d Or *in the flesh*

the same as saying that the Church is God’s family. What is the purpose of the family or church? An answer to this question should increase our gratitude of God’s wisdom in creating a body of believers to continue the preaching of God’s way of salvation “in” and “through” Jesus Christ. Paul also addresses the intent, or aim, of the Church by calling attention to God’s family unit as the “**pillar and foundation** of the truth” (**στῦλος καὶ ἐδραῖωμα τῆς ἀληθείας**, *stylos kai hedraiōma tēs alētheias*), which truth is none other than the Gospel. E. F. Scott is on target when he writes:

He has ordained the Church as **the pillar and bulwark of the Truth**, i. e. of the gospel, in which He has revealed Himself. The word translated **bulwark** means literally ‘something to rest on,’ and is commonly used for a basis or foundation.⁵

Paul defines this “pillar and bulwark of the truth” by calling awareness to “the mystery of godliness.” (**τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον**, *tēs eusebeias mystērion*). What is this “mystery of godliness” that the church, as declared by Paul, is spoken of as the “pillar and the foundation of truth” (NIV)? **This mystery is distinct from the mystery religions of paganism.** The biblical mystery is none other than Jesus Himself. Once more, we should pay attention to Paul as he explains this mystery: “He **appeared** in a body, **was vindicated** by the Spirit, **was seen** by angels, **was preached** among the nations, **was believed** on in the world, **was taken** up in glory” (3:16). For Paul, the Church builds its faith upon the Lordship of Christ, which he sets forth in this magnificent and breathtaking hymn. In this hymn, Paul speaks of the virgin birth of Christ, the resurrection of Jesus, angels ministering unto Him, proclamation of Jesus as the Savior of the world, many believing on Him, and His ascension. **The Gospel is about Jesus.** The Church exists to make known this truth. Paul writes to the Galatians about the departure of some from this reality of God’s redemption—justification by faith in the finished work of Christ upon Calvary:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—⁷ which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ.⁸ But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!⁹ As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:6-9)

The word *gospel*, like the word *church*, often receives a definition that is based upon our own distinctive fellowship, not according to the Scriptures. Prior to Paul’s denunciation of those who perverted the Gospel of Christ (**εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ**, *εὐαγγέλιον τοῦ Χριστοῦ*), he defined the Gospel in 1:4: “Who gave himself for our sins.” It is **this truth** that the Church is to maintain. Paul defended this Gospel by saying: “But when God, who set me apart from birth

⁵E. F. Scott, *The Pastoral Epistles*, in James Moffatt, ed., *The Moffatt New Testament Commentary* (New York and London: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1936), 39. **E. F. Scott** (1868–1954) was professor of biblical theology and New Testament at Union Theological Seminary. Scott was well known for his authority on Christianity.

and called me by his grace was pleased to **reveal his Son** in me so that I might **preach him** (εὐαγγελίζωμαι αὐτόν, *euangelizōmai auton*) among the Gentiles” (1:16). After his conversion, Paul reveals a visit to Jerusalem in which he says that he “set before them the gospel that I preach among the Gentiles” (2:2). The Gospel focused upon how one is put in a right relationship with God. Again, Paul jots down:

We who are Jews by birth and not ‘Gentile sinners’¹⁶ know that a man is **not** justified by observing the law, **but** by faith in Jesus Christ. We, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified. (2:15-16)

The Book of Galatians is a book about how we are justified before God. In defense of justification by faith, Paul calls forth Abraham (2166-1991 BC) to explain the Gospel in its fullness:

The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and **announced the gospel in advance** [προεσηγγελίσσατο τῷ Ἀβραάμ, *proeuēngelisato tō Abraam*, preached before good tidings to Abraham] **to Abraham**: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’^b⁹ So **those who have faith** are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. (3:8-9)

Again, he puts pen to paper: “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’^a meaning one person, who is Christ” (3:16).⁶ This “mystery of godliness” is unfolded in great detail in the Book of Ephesians. Paul employs the word *mystery* (μυστήριον, *mystērion*) seven times in this short Epistle.⁷ This mystery is none other than Christ Himself. In fact, Paul, in the Book of Colossians, states emphatically that this “mystery” is Christ:

Now I rejoice in what was suffered for you, and I fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ’s afflictions, for the sake of his body, which is the church.²⁵ I have become its servant by the commission God gave me to present to you the word of God in its fullness—²⁶ the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints.²⁷ To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, (μυστηρίου τούτου, *mystēriou toutou*, “this mystery”) which is Christ (ὃς ἐστὶν Χριστός, *hos estin Christos*, “who is Christ”) in you, the hope of glory.²⁸ We **proclaim him**, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ.²⁹ To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me. I want you to know how much I am struggling for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally.² My purpose is that they may **be encouraged in heart and united in love**, so that they may have the full riches of complete

^b Gen. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18

^a Gen. 12:7; 13:15; 24:7

⁶For an overview of the Book of Galatians, see Dallas Burdette, “Overview of the Book of Galatians,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2008), 299-343.

⁷ 1:9; 3:3, 4, 6, 9; 5:32; 6:19.

understanding, in order that they may know the **mystery of God**, namely, **Christ**. (Colossians 1:24—2:3)

In Ephesians 1:3-14, Paul briefly unfolds the “mystery of godliness.” He begins his comments with this startling statement: “He chose us **in him** (*ἐν αὐτῷ*, *en autō*) before the creation of the world” (1:4). This “mystery” is completely unique in the annals of history. **Christianity** is absolutely exclusive among the religions of the world. **It has a history before its actual history commenced—a life before its birth.** Paul calls this “mystery” the “mystery of his will” in 1:9. In Chapter 3, he also writes of this mystery as “the administration of God’s grace” (3:3) as well as “the mystery of Christ” (3:4). “This mystery” is identified as the Gospel (3:6), and finally, “the administration of this mystery” (3:9).

As stated above, in the Colossian Epistle, Paul says plainly, “This mystery, which is Christ in you” (Colossians 1:27). In Ephesian 6:19, Paul requests prayers for strength to fearlessly proclaim Jesus as God’s way of salvation: “Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me **so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel.**” In Chapter 3 of Ephesians, Paul discloses the purpose of the Church in God’s scheme of redemption:

I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God’s grace given me through the working of his power.⁸ Although I am less than the least of all God’s people, this grace was given me: to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ,⁹ and to make plain to everyone the **administration of this mystery**, which for ages past was kept hidden in God, who created all things.¹⁰ **His intent was that now, through the church** (*διὰ τῆς ἐκκλησίας*, *dia tēs ekklēsias*), **the manifold wisdom of God** (*σοφία τοῦ θεοῦ*, *sophia tou theou*) **should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms,**¹¹ **according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.**¹² In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.¹³ I ask you, therefore, not to be discouraged because of my sufferings for you, which are your glory. (3:7-13)

What is this “manifold wisdom of God” about? Paul discloses this “wisdom” in his first Corinthian correspondence. How could God be just and, at the same time, justify sinful humanity. Paul discloses how God was able to accomplish this act and remain just. Listen to Paul as he speaks of God’s wisdom, which wisdom had been kept hidden from the foundation of the world:

It is because of him [God the Father] that you are **in Christ Jesus**, who **has become for us wisdom from God**—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.³¹ Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”^b (1 Corinthians 1:30-31)

God in His wisdom made Jesus “our righteousness, holiness and redemption.” **It is through the family of God that this information is communicated to a lost and dying world.** Even the angels did not understand how God would redeem sinful humanity. Peter addresses this subject of the angels and their desire to know how God would justify sinful

^b Jer. 9:24

humanity in his First Epistle to God's elect by writing: "Even angels long to look into these things" (1 Peter 1:12).

How can we, in good conscience, disassociate ourselves from God's family, which family is commanded to spread the Good News of salvation by grace "in" and "through" Jesus? We do not read in the New Testament of the concept of "apartness" from God's family. We, as believers in Jesus the Messiah, are not to live our lives in isolation from His kingdom. **The Church, as a whole, is to tell the story of redemption initiated by God and accomplished by Christ with the sealing by the Holy Spirit on those who believe** (Ephesians 1:13).

The Good News is that God loves the human race in spite of who they are. Emil Brunner writes: "The cross of Christ is the point where God's love meets sinful man, if the sinful man, also, stands there, that is by faith."⁸ **The Good News is that God's act in Christ gives men and women a new standing.** It goes without saying that as individuals we cannot forgive ourselves; forgiveness is His prerogative alone. God forgives! At the same time, though He does it in such a way that it becomes clear to the one forgiven as to how seriously God takes guilt into consideration. God takes away guiltiness through the Cross. Paul explains this paradox of justice and forgiveness this way:

But now (Νῦν δέ, Nuni de) a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.²² This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference,²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,²⁴ and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.²⁵ God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement,^a through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—²⁶ he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. (Romans 3:21-26)⁹

The Church is to continue to tell the story of how "God presented him [Jesus] as a sacrifice of Atonement." Is God's Church important in our daily walk with Him? In Paul's final farewell to the leaders (elders) from Ephesus, he speaks of the Church as significant:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God (ἐκκλησίαν τοῦ θεοῦ, ekklēsiān tou theou), which he bought with his own blood. (Acts 20:28)

Since the Church is purchased with the "blood" of God, can we, in all good conscience, treat the Church with contempt, dislike, or disrespect? Again, the author of the Book of Hebrews speaks of the Church of Jesus in glowing terms:

⁸ Emil Brunner, *Faith, Hope, and Love* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1956), 20.

^a 25 Or *as the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin*

⁹For an in-depth study of this section of Scripture, see Dallas Burdette, "Overview of Romans," in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom: A Spiritual Narrative of Liberation* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2008), 249-281.

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,²³ to the church of the firstborn (**ἐκκλησία πρωτοτόκων**, *ekklēsia prōtotokōn*, “church of firstborn ones”), whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect,²⁴ to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Hebrews 12:22-24)

Just a cursory glance of Holy Scripture reveals the importance of the Church in the lives of God’s people. Prior to the author’s reference to the “church of the firstborn,” or “church of the firstborn ones,” he admonished Christians not to abandon the assembly:

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.²⁵ Let us not **give up** meeting together (**ἐπισυναγωγῆν ἑαυτῶν**, *episynagōgēn heautōn*, “coming together of ourselves”), as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. (10:24-25)

Even in the face of daily danger, they were told not to **give up** (**ἐγκαταλείτω**, *enkataleitō*, “abandon, leave behind”) the habit of meeting together. Immediately, upon the heels of what he had just written, he cautions these Christians to consider carefully their standing before God:

How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has **trampled the Son of God under foot**, who has **treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant** that sanctified him, and who has **insulted the Spirit of grace**? (10:29)

Are we trampling “under foot” the Son of God? Do we treat the covenant blood as an unholy thing? Are we insulting the “Spirit of grace”? Not only are we exhorted **not** to “throw out” the habit of meeting together, but we are also taught to be holy:

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. (12:14-15)

The family of God should be living in such a way that the love of God is reflected in the daily activities of His saints. Peter, too, deals with the relevance of the Church in his First Epistle. He calls attention to “**who**” we are and to “**what**” we are to do as servants of the Most High God:

As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him—⁵ you also, like **living stones**, are **being built into a spiritual house** to be a **holy priesthood**, offering **spiritual sacrifices** acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:4-6)

We are “**living stones**” within the family of God. We are also, in the words of Peter, “being built into a spiritual house.” **As God’s elect, we constitute a “holy priesthood.”** As priests of God, we are to offer up “spiritual sacrifices.” Again, Peter writes down the very purpose of those who belong to God’s people:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, **that you may declare the praises of him** who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. ¹⁰ Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. (2:8-10)

Peter says essentially the same thing that Paul expresses in his Epistle to the Ephesians. By our declaring the praises of God for redemption, we are fulfilling the intent of God for His people as a part of His household. **God's objective was and is that His manifold wisdom should be made known to the world through His Church, or community of believers.** Unfortunately, today, the common foundation for many churches is not Jesus, but rather their own brand of orthodoxy, which prevailing attitudes are identified as the "true church." The groundwork for God's new group of people has been laid, and the starting point is Jesus.

We, as members of the company of redeemed ones, need to recapture the essence of God's Church, which consists of people, not an ecclesiastical organization. If the Church is to capture the world for Christ, there must be a reflection upon our common relationship to one another. We are in partnership with each other. We need to cross over our denominational barriers and our long-held traditions and return to the New Testament concept of solidarity, which is expressed by Paul in his Second Epistle to Corinth. He writes: "Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches" (1 Corinthians 11:28).

The collective body of God's people is called the Church, or **ἐκκλησία** (*ekklēsia*, assembly" or "congregation). In Romans 16:1, Paul speaks of the **church in Cenchrea**, which is a collective body of God's people. Then he speaks of "all the **churches of the Gentiles**" [**ἐκκλησίαι τῶν ἐθνῶν**, *ekklēsiai tōn ethnōn*] (16:4). He also speaks of "**the church**" in the home of Priscilla and Aquila (16:5). In 16:16, he speaks of the "**churches of Christ**" (**ἐκκλησίαι τοῦ Χριστοῦ**, *ekklēsiai tou Christou*). The expression "churches of Christ" is no more the name of the church than the expression, "churches of the Gentiles." The name "Christ" (**Χριστός**, *Christos*) is the title of our Lord, not His name. His name is Jesus (**Ἰησοῦς**, *Iēsous*). Paul begins his first Corinthian correspondence with:

Unto the **church of God** (**τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ**, *tē ekklēsia tou theou*) which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both their's and our's.(1 Corinthians 1:2, KJV).

The Book of Galatians begins with the phrase: "To the **churches in Galatia**" (Galatians 1:2). Also, in this same chapter, Paul refers to "the **churches of Judea** that are in Christ" (1:22). In the Ephesian Epistle, he begins with: "To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 1:1). As Paul closes his Epistle to the Philippians, he writes: "After this letter has been read to you, see that it is also read in the **church of the Laodiceans** and that you in turn read the letter from Laodicea" (Colossians 4:16). To the Thessalonians he wrote: "To **the church of the Thessalonians** in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1:1).

The English word *church* is more accurately translated as "assembly." **Peter calls the assemblies of Christ "God's elect"** (1 Peter 1:1). The Book of Revelation also addresses "seven churches in the Province of Asia" (Revelation 1:4). The elect of God exists in various local assemblies. We, today, to some extent, are stuck with the English word *church*.

Regrettably, the Reformers were baptized Catholics, and, as a result of their inherited traditions from the Catholic Church, there was not a total new beginning, but a slight cleansing of some issues that were devastatingly wrong. Sorry to say, the Protestant Movement failed in its true identification of the “church” as an organism rather than as an institution. This breakdown in classification resulted in divisions within the Body of Christ. As a result of the organizational structure of the church, numerous Christians have isolated themselves from other believers. Each secluded body of saints identified itself as the “true church.” Emil Brunner goes right to the heart of this misconception:

The isolationist tendency hostile to co-operation, arises precisely from the false opinion that a particular church is the true *Ecclesia*, the legitimate heir of the Christian fellowship of the New Testament.¹⁰

We need to recapture the spirit of *koinōnia* (κοινωνία, “fellowship, or communion”) with His Body. *Koinōnia* should lead us to a common proclamation of the Gospel of Christ and to a common action in the Church. As God’s people, we need to maintain the Spirit’s unity [ἐνότητα τοῦ πνεύματος, *henotēta tou pneumatos*, “unity of the Spirit”] (Ephesians 4:3). This unity of purpose is set forth in the Lord’s Supper.¹¹ This harmony is the concord for which Jesus prayed (John 17). This unison is a world-embracing agreement of oneness—to all who believe in His name. Everyone who is called of God is a part of this “fellowship of the Spirit.” Paul writes to the Philippians about this *koinōnia*:

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit (κοινωνία πνεύματος, *koinōnia pneumatos*), if any tenderness and compassion,² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.⁴ Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:1-4)

We play a part in a particular history—the act of salvation, that is to say, the life-giving activity of the Holy Spirit. When we reject God’s new community, we throw out the life-giving movement of the Holy Spirit. Life for the believer is a constant sharing with each other. God calls us into the fellowship of Jesus Christ. Paul expresses it this way: “God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son (κοινωνίαν τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ, *koinōnian tou huiou autou*) Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful” (1 Corinthians 1:9). To those who responded to Jesus in repentance and baptism, God added to His new humanity, which new household came into existence through the power of God. On the Day of Pentecost, Luke reports the reaction of the crowd to Peter’s sermon, which account states that about 3000 repented of their sins and were baptized in the name of Jesus. Luke concludes his remarks by saying that the people were

¹⁰Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1952), 113.

¹¹For an in-depth study of the significance of the Lord’s Supper within the Christian community, see, Dallas Burdette, “The Significance of the Last Supper,” in Dallas Burdette, *From Legalism to Freedom*, 440-448.

“Praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

The saved met on a daily basis in the Temple courts (2:46). In this same context, Luke records: “They devoted themselves to the **apostles’ teaching** and to the **fellowship**, to the **breaking of bread** and to **prayer**” (2:42). The KJV translates Acts 2:47: “Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.” The NIV translates this passage: “Praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.” The English word *church* is not in the Greek text. The Greek text simply reads: “And the Lord added the ones being saved (τοὺς σωζομένους, *tous sōzomenous*, “the ones being saved”) from day to day together (ἐπὶ τὸ αὐτό, *epi to auto*, together).” Those who responded to the Good News of God were added to the elect of God, not to a particular denomination.

When we speak of the Church today, we should be conscious that God’s family continues to repeat the early testimony of the Body of Christ—Christ was **Crucified** and **Resurrected** and is Head of His family. The early Church did not venerate the body of a dead person, but they did worship the risen Lord. The Church wants to know Christ and the power of His Resurrection. The Church has always been made up of fallible and ordinary people—people saved by grace. For us, as believers, the Church is still the most important single phenomenon that human history has to show. The existing Body of Christ testifies to the authenticity of Christianity. **When we repudiate, or renounce, the Church, we ignore the fact that we, too, are a part of God’s new temple. It is in Christ that we escape the jungle of individualism.**

The community of Christ is God’s gift to humanity. The Church of Jesus is a radically new fellowship. The new people of God represent the new humanity—a people separated for God’s service. It is in and through the Church that we are reminded that we are not our own. Within the Body of Christ, we are consciously aware of the reality of God’s redemption through the observance of the Lord’s Supper and the practice of Baptism. When we, as saints of God, gather to hear the Word of God preached, this hearing of the word helps us to renew our lives. Why do we assemble with other believers? We gather together in response to God’s act of redemption in the gift of His Son.

When we congregate to express our worship in a corporate setting, we draw spiritual strength and encouragement from this gathering of God’s people. Every meeting should be to encourage one another in the faith and to give honor and glory to the One who sent His Son to redeem us. Our collective gatherings as God’s people should be a time for us in which the barricades of race, nationality, class, sex, and education are demolished, or bulldozed into oblivion. This get-together should be a place where the needy, the browbeaten, the outcast, and the unloved find a warm welcome and feel themselves at home. This reunion should be a place where we find support and back-up.

With the coming of Jesus, we witness the breaking in of a new age in which Jesus creates a new *ekklēsia*. **The Church is the New Jerusalem, the New Heaven and Earth,¹² and the**

¹²For a detailed study of the new heaven and earth, see Dallas Burdette, “A New Heaven and a New Earth,” in Dallas Burdette, *Biblical Preaching and Teaching: Series of Specialized Studies from Psalms*

Elect of God. When God adds to His Body of believers, the faithful share in a new life. It is not within the Gospel of God for us to go on living in the old way when we have come face-to-face with the Kingdom of God. As we reflect upon the New Israel of God, we are mindful of the pure grace of God. The Church consists of those who have been set apart to be holy and to serve God. The Church does not allow for individualism, but fellowship in God's new association of redeemed ones.

This specialized study about the purpose of the church is written to help us rediscover the Church as the New People of God. As the community of God, we are to seek unity among His sons and daughters as an answer to the prayer of Jesus (John 17). It is in this vein that **W. A. Visser't Hooft** (1900-1985, secretary for the World Council of Churches) and **J. H. Oldham** (1874-1969, Scottish missionary in India) addressed the problem of division within the Body of Christ with all of its various denominations. **They capture the very heart of the matter:** "All agree that there is essentially only *one* Church, since there is only one Lord. As a reality of faith, the word Church has no plural."¹³ This concept of oneness is very difficult for many Christians, especially since many believers identify their particular church as THE CHURCH, which philosophy excludes all other denominations as belonging to Christ. Once more, Hooft and Oldham focus on the heart of the issue when they write:

If it is said that there is only one Church, this implies for some Churches that only one visible Church is the true Church, but for others that no visible Church can claim to be *the* Church of Christ, since all Christian Churches together represent that reality. These examples might be multiplied *ad infinitum*; but the point is clear, namely, that our belief in the Church is both the basis which enables us to meet together, and at the same time the barrier which makes us unable to speak with a united voice.¹⁴

Sorry to say, for countless sincere Christians, the Church often conveys the belief that in order for one to be a Christian, he or she must hold to the doctrinal formulation of their distinctive fellowship. What makes us one is not our adherence to certain doctrinal issues, but rather that we have been reconciled to God through Christ our Lord. The Church is a Christian group of people, that is to say, a fellowship of persons living together who have been redeemed through the blood of Christ. Yet again, Hooft captures the very essence of what the Church is and its mission: "**The Church is the community which has been gathered and mobilized by the Holy Spirit in order to fulfill that part of the plan of God which must be fulfilled in the final period of History.**"¹⁵ Christians are called into *koinōnia* (fellowship), which *koinōnia* is in Christ. Every local Assembly of God's citizens should have one primary goal—the proclamation of the Jesus as God's Way of salvation for lost humanity.

● *Revelation* ● *Hebrews* (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 2010), 257-302. Also, access freedominchrist.net and then click on the subtitle ESCHATOLOGY for a detailed study of "A New Heaven and a New Earth."

¹³Dr. W. A. Visser't Hooft and Dr. J. H. Oldham, *The Church and Its function in Society* (London: George Allen & Unwin LTD, 1937, 1938), 89.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹⁵ W. A. Visser't Hooft, *The Pressure of Our Common Calling* (Garden City, New York, Doubleday & Company, 1959), 36.

As stated earlier, when we assemble to partake of the Lord's Supper, this meal should be a constant reminder of unity among God's people. **Unity is found in none other than Jesus of Nazareth.** In spite of the divisions existing among Christians, God does not recognize the existence of parties or separated churches. Even with differences within the various communities of God's people, Christians still belong to the one and only people of God. When churches are characterized by self-centered denominationalism and institutionalism, God is not pleased. What is the calling of the Church? It is to fulfill the mission of spreading the Gospel of God, which Gospel has been entrusted to the Church.

We are united because we all share in one common calling. Unity in the early Church included all who called upon the name of Christ. Does the Good News of God's Way of salvation still radiate from our countenance? Is there little warmth in our hearts for God's "community of Resurrection"? As believers in the finished work of Christ upon Calvary, we should wrap ourselves up in the grace of God "in" and "through" Jesus. **What does the Church mean to us? We should never forget that from the very beginning of the Day of Pentecost, the Christian society was a missionary society.**

If we wish to become more and more like God, we must allow the community of the Resurrected One to become a part of our lives. In God's blueprint for His children, we realize that Jesus Christ and His kingdom are God's blueprint for His offspring. The Church calls attention to the fact that Jesus cried from the Cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (ἤλι ἤλι λεμὰ σαβαχθάνι, *ēli ēli lema sabachthani*) in order to keep us from crying, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:45).¹⁶ Should we dispense with the Church? No! The Church exists for the sake of the world. **Every local congregation is intended to be missionary in purpose and missionary in design.** Every Church should adopt a "GO" theology, not a "COME" theology. The negative "wait" and "let come" is the very opposite of what Jesus taught His followers. We, as disciples of Jesus, come together in order that we might "GO."

CONCLUSION

As we reflect upon the Church in our lives, we must ask ourselves, what does living under the Cross of Christ mean to us? We can say that our lives under the Gospel are the opening of our hearts to Christ Jesus. Is Christ first in our outlook? This opening of our days to Christ enables us to bring forth fruits that result in God's glory. When we allow God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit the right-of-way in our daily walk with Him, then we maintain a consciousness of God's Good News, and, at the same time, we make ourselves available to Him in order to be a channel that portrays His kingdom with a view of welcoming the fullness of God's glory.

Again, what does the Church mean to us? What does it mean to us to assemble with the saints during the week? **Regrettably, many Christians abandon the assembling of themselves with other believers.** Yet, a life under the Gospel is a life that is active in the

¹⁶I am indebted to Emil Brunner, *I believe in the Living God*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 82-83, for this insight.

Church. Life in the Christian community is not only something between Christ and the individual, but it is also life in the Body of Christ. In other words, if we acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord in our existence, this acknowledgement involves our sharing our faith with others. To be a Christian means to be incorporated into the Body of Christ. **The Church is the fellowship whereby the Gospel of God continues to be proclaimed throughout the world.** We, as individuals, are nourished through the Church. As we witness Christian baptism¹⁷ and the Lord's Supper, we are constantly reminded of our lives under the Gospel.

We should keep in mind that life in the Church is not a life of isolationism. We should identify ourselves with other believers. Have we discarded the need for the Church in our way of life? We should never forget that the function of the internal life of the Church is to enable us to grow together in the Body of Christ. Jesus purchased the Church with His blood. The ultimate authority for the Church is found in the power of God. Also, it is through the proclamation of the Good News of God that we discover the function of the Church in society. Out of the Good News of God, we discover the kingdom foretold by the prophets (See Daniel 2, Isaiah 2, and Joel 2).

We can say that the Gospel brought the Church into being and still keeps the Church in obedience to God. If the Church wishes to be a witness to the world, it must again and again search the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments for those passages that testify about Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah. If the Church is unimportant, we wonder why the Holy Spirit wrote: "And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47). As we think about the significance of the Church in God's scheme of redemption, we need to be conscious that the essence of God's new humanity is the oneness of communion with Christ "in" and "through" our faith in Him.

The Church is a spiritual organism; it is not an ecclesiastical organization. It is people. It is the elect of God. It is the community of God. It is the New Israel of God. Christ created a spiritual communion of persons redeemed by His blood, not a religious or clerical corporation. What is the purpose of the church? The body of Christ is responsible for proclaiming Jesus as the Mediator between God and humanity. **Every believer is to be a minister of God's reconciliation.** Do we seek to live our lives separate and apart from God's kingdom as foretold by the prophets and announced by Christ?¹⁸ Are we Christ's ambassadors for the advancement of His kingdom? Have we received God's grace in vain? It is in this vein that Paul writes:

¹⁷For an analysis of Christian baptism, see Dallas Burdette's three chapters on baptism, in Dallas Burdette, *Biblical Preaching and Teaching: Jesus and Our Responsibilities*, Vol., 1 (Longwood, FL: Xulon Press, 209), 235-271.

¹⁸ There is a distinction between the church and God's kingdom. Daniel Rogers has recently written five excellent essays on the Kingdom of God. These essays may be found on the following site: [The Coming of the Kingdom \[5/5\]: labornotinvain.com](http://labornotinvain.com). The church is God's task force to call individuals to God's Rule in their lives. My objective in this essay is to focus upon the "purpose" of the church in God's scheme of redemption. Daniel is an excellent exegete of the Scriptures; he applies a common-sense approach to proper interpretation of Scriptures—CONTEXT, CONTEXT and CONTEXT. Please visit his website!!!

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and **gave us the ministry of reconciliation**: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ **We are therefore Christ's ambassadors**, as though God were **making his appeal through us**. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin^a for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. As **God's fellow workers** we urge you not to receive God's grace in vain. (2 Corinthians 5:17—6:1)

^a Or *be a sin offering*