

TOO HOT TO HANDLE

2 What Is A Church?

Scripture Reading

1 Corinthians 12:12 – 30

Last time we asked the question, “What is the church?” We saw that God is calling people but He is not just calling individuals. He is building a community of people who belong to Him, a community of people individually and collectively ruled by Christ, a community which represents Christ in the world, a community in which God dwells and which He watches over jealously, a community which is energised and directed by the Holy Spirit, a growing community, a community which looks forward to perfection as the bride of Christ. That community — all the people living and dead who make it up — is the church.

There is more — much more — that we could say about the nature of the church but this is not meant to be a systematic study of the doctrine of the church. We are merely laying the foundation for a study of one particular aspect of church life. We want to examine the nature of the relationship that exists between members of a church such as ours.

This week we are going to begin with a slightly different question. What is a church?

The Christians Living In One Place

There is only one church but sometimes, in the Bible, the word church is used in relation to the believers living in a particular place.

To the church of God which is at Corinth...

1 Corinthians 1:2

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians ...

1 Thessalonians 1:1

There are the seven churches of Asia Minor and at least one time the word church is used of believers assembling together in a particular home.

The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.

1 Corinthians 16:19

The book of Acts refers to churches in every place.

“So when they had appointed elders in every church.”

Acts 14:23

There is only one church and there are separate churches. Think of the church as being like a big iceberg. Most of it is under the surface, hidden from view, but here and there bits stick up out of the water. Each bit looks like an iceberg. Each bit is made of the same stuff as an iceberg. Each bit is an iceberg but there is only one iceberg. A local church is the bit of the church that is visible to the world at a certain place and time. When we meet here we are part of the church, we represent the church in this place, at this time, we are a church.

So What?

What are the practical implications of what you have learned so far?

All of those characteristics of the church that we have described should be evident in a local church. If there is one church of which we are a local manifestation we will reflect the oneness of the church. At the very least we will work in harmony with — not compete with — other

churches. But is that all? What really is the nature of the oneness? What is the nature of the bond that unites the church and what should be the nature of the bond that unites the members of any local church?

What's The Oneness?

When we think of oneness we tend to think first of all of organisational unity where people try to bring about unity by creating unifying structures. That is not greatly in evidence in the New Testament church

Various terms, metaphors and descriptions used to help us understand the nature of the unity of the church. Here are some that we are going to think about:

- Fellowship
- One Body
- Fellow citizens
- Family
- Love
- The unity of the Godhead

Fellowship

Church members are in fellowship with God and fellowship with God means fellowship with one another

“That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.”

! John 1:3

The Greek word for fellowship, *koinonia*, emphasises the idea that members of the church have certain things in common. What are the things we have in common?

“There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

Ephesians 4:4 – 6

Note that last little bit of verse 6. “Who is above all, and through all, and in you all.” This is about more than just sharing standards and working at the same thing. The same Father is *in* us all: same heart, same life-force, same driving force etc etc.

One Body

“For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity.”

Ephesians 2:14 – 16

“Speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

Ephesians 4:15 – 16 [NIV]

In the New Testament, the church is pictured as a body. Christ is the head and the various members are the various functioning parts of the body. What understanding does the image of a body give regarding the unity of the church?

The parts of a body have different functions but they work in harmony and even though they are not directly linked each is connected to the head. The head controls and that is why organisational structure is not such a big deal.

Fellow Citizens

"Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God."

Ephesians 2:19

What does the "fellow citizens" metaphor teach us?

Family

What can we learn from the family metaphor?

Love

"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."

John 13:34 – 35

"And I have declared to them Your name, and will declare it, that the love with which You loved Me may be in them, and I in them."

John 17:26

Members of the church love one another. What does that say about the nature of the church's unity?

People who love are people who rejoice in one another. They are pleased to be together, they long for one another's company and they look out for one another even when it costs.

The Unity Of The Godhead

"I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.

John 17:20 – 23

Jesus prayed, "That they all may be one." And He had in mind the same kind of unity that exists within the Godhead. What do you learn about the church from that?

What Do We Have To Do?

Unity is given to the church. If you are a believer you are in the church and if you are in the church you are one with all believers. Nothing can prevent that unless you are either walking in sin or else you are not a believer at all.

But unity also has to be developed

“Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”

2 Corinthians 5:18 – 19

We are told “You are one” but we are also told “Be one” The church is commanded to reflect the kind of oneness we have been talking about this evening and a local church — a church like this one — must reflect what is true of the universal church

Next Week

Tonight we have been thinking in abstract terms and generalities about the nature of the bond that unites members of the church. Next week we will look at what that bond looks like in action.