

The "What" and "Why" of Church

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[0 : 0 0] Well, let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your Word, particularly because your Word points us to your Son and for the blessings that we can have in and through him. And Father, we pray this morning that as we think about church from your Word, that you would give us minds to understand and hearts that will put into practice the things you tell us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, children have a way of putting things, don't they? Usually it's bluntly. And so when asked what his favourite part of church was, Alan, aged eight, said, the end. When asked to stop fidgeting during a long sermon, Rosemary, aged seven, said, Mummy, if we just give him the money now, will he let us go?

When asked why we need to be quiet in church, Amy, aged five, said, because people are sleeping. It's not true of this church, of course. There are so many jokes out there, though, about church and about church being boring. So why do we go to church then? I mean, it's lovely to see you all here this morning, let me say. If we didn't have church on this today, you'd probably still be Christians in seven days' time, I take it. And so maybe we should just dissolve church altogether.

Can you imagine that? No church on a Sunday. You wake up Sunday morning and there's nowhere to be. You can sleep in, do what you like. No rosters to fill, no duties to perform, nothing to remember, a whole day to yourself. I don't want to oversell it here. But why do we come to church? Well, the answer has to do with what church is. That is, there are all sorts of reasons why we come to church. And if I asked you to spend a moment talking to one another, I'm sure you'd come up with excellent reasons, biblical reasons, why we should come to church. But there is one fundamental reason why we gather together as God's people. And that essentially is because we are gathered together already as God's people. And so I want to show you from different passages and different angles this concept that we are to be who we are in Christ. But we're going to start off with what is church, which is point one on your outlines. And the word church is used in different ways today. It can describe a church building. It can even describe a church denomination like the Anglican Church.

In fact, there's even an Aussie rock band called the church. But in the Bible, the word for church, it's on the next slide, is the Greek word ecclesia, which simply means an assembly or a meeting or a gathering, a gathering of people. And this word can be used for any gathering, actually. And so when, in Acts chapter 19, when Paul was preaching at Ephesus, some of the Ephesians didn't like it, so they stirred up a big crowd to turn on Paul. And on the next slide, we read that Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. It was too dangerous. In verse 32, the assembly, the ecclesia, was in confusion. Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there, which is quite funny, really. But the thing to notice, though, is the word for the assembly, for the riotous crowd, is the same word as church. And so you can actually translate, if you go back, Linda, for a second, you could actually translate that verse, verse 32, as the church was in confusion, which is sadly true of some churches today.

[3 : 5 2] But you see, the word church simply means an assembly, a gathering. And so if you gathered to play football, then you could call yourselves the football church. Or if you gathered to do craft, like the ladies do on Friday mornings here, then they could call themselves the craft church.

It simply means gathering. But of course, it's not the Christian church, is it? It's not what we're doing this morning. And so what makes this gathering the Christian gathering? Well, God does. The Christian church is God's gathering in and through Christ, point two. In other words, it is God who creates the church by saving us through Jesus and uniting us together in Jesus. And I'll explain more of that in a moment. But the point is, what we do here, we don't create the church by what we do. Rather, God creates a church by what he has done through Jesus. And perhaps the shortest verse to show you this is from Acts 20 on the next slide. Here, Paul is speaking to the leaders of the

Ephesian church, and he says, Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. Now, whose church is the Christian church? It's God's church, isn't it? Why? Well, because he has bought it, bought us with his own blood or with his own son's blood. You see, we here this morning are not the Christian gathering because of anything we do. Rather, we are the Christian gathering because of what God has done for us through Jesus. If we believe in Jesus, then God has saved us. God has given his son and his blood to pay for us and our sin. And so now God can forgive us and gather us together as Christians into his church. We are God's church created at the cost of Christ's blood. And if that's who we are, then are we not to express it by meeting together as Christians gathered together in Christ?

We have some friends who have started giving their children piano lessons. They bought a piano, piano, and then that wasn't cheap. And then they gave some piano lessons as well, which wasn't cheap either. And when the children play, they actually enjoy it. So one of their biggest frustrations is when their children won't practice the piano. You see, they've done everything needed for them to play the piano, you know, bought the piano, the lessons and so on, and the kids even enjoy it. And so the children have every reason to practice the piano. And when they won't, the parents just shake their heads. They've done everything to make them piano players, but they just simply refuse to practice.

And it's like that with us and going to church. You see, God has done everything needless for us to be his church. He has given his son who by his blood has forgiven us and gathered us together. And so we have every reason to go to church and to be who we are. And when we don't go to church for no good reason, I wonder if God shakes his head. Well, God creates us as Christians, as the Christian church through Jesus. That's who we are. And so that also means then we're actually united to each other. And we see this in Ephesians. We'll have to do a couple of Bible flicks this morning. So please turn in your Bibles to page 1174 to Ephesians chapter 2. 1174. And then we'll come back to Hebrews.

Here Paul is writing to Gentiles, that is people who are not Jews, who are not part of God's people, who were never part of God's gathering. And he begins in chapter 2 by saying to them, as for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. And then Paul says, well, actually, all of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our flesh and following its desires and thoughts.

[8 : 20] Like the rest, we were all by nature deserving of God's wrath, God's judgment. But verse 4, beautiful verse, but because of God's great love for us, God who is rich in mercy made us alive with Christ.

Even when we were dead in transgressions, it is by grace you have been saved. This is the verse I want you to particularly notice. You see, we were once spiritually dead because of our sin. Physically alive, yes, but spiritually dead because of sin. Yet when we believe in Jesus, God made us spiritually alive again. He raised us up with Christ. But did you notice in verse 6 what tense is used? Is it past tense, present tense or future tense? Verse 6, it's past tense, isn't it? God has raised past tense, us up with Christ. We are spiritually raised with Christ. We are seated with Christ. Where? In the heavenly realms, he says. But how does all this work? I mean, after all, we're still sitting here in

Doncaster. Well, when we become Christians, we are united to Jesus, you see, by the Spirit. And so what Jesus does, we do spiritually. Let me see if I can explain it like this. Has anyone ever been tandem skydiving here? Just curious? No, no. Neither are I. Okay, on the next slide is a picture. I was just, you know, maybe. Okay, here's someone going tandem skydiving. I love the man's face above that. But when you go tandem skydiving, you are united to the skydiver by a strap. And so when he jumps, you jump. Because you're united. You've got no choice. When he spins around in the air, you spin around in the air. When he pulls the chute and goes up, well, then you go up, if you like. Well, so also with Jesus. When we become Christians, we're united with Jesus, not by a strap, but by the Spirit. And so when Jesus goes down and dies to sin, we die to sin. When he rises to new life, we are raised to new life. When he is seated in the heavenly realms, we are seated in the heavenly realms. But it is a spiritual thing, because we are united by the Spirit. And we're still physically here in Doncaster. But the point is, we're united in or with Christ. And this means that we're also now united with each other. So look at verse 11 of Ephesians 2. He says, therefore, remember that formerly, you who are Gentiles by birth, non-Jews, the uncircumcised, we're called

that by the Jews who call themselves a circumcision, which is done in the body by human hands. Remember that at one time, you Gentiles were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus, you who once far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. And then he goes on to say, for Christ himself is our peace, who has made the two groups, Jew and Gentile, one, and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility by setting aside in his flesh, the law with its commands and regulations.

And God's purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace. And in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. He came and preached peace to you who are far away, you Gentiles who are far away, and peace to those Jews who are near. And through Jesus, we both have access to the Father by the one Spirit. And now there's lots in there. But the thing I want you to notice, verse 15, what is God's purpose in sending Jesus? It is to create one new humanity, to create one new people of God, to create one new church of God. In other words, when we become Christians, we're not only spiritually united to Jesus, we're actually brought together and united to one another. When we come to Jesus, we come to one another. And so on the next slide is a couple of dots. Now the yellow dot is Jesus. Just imagine the yellow dot is Jesus. The blue dots are people scattered around. Okay. And as they become Christians, as they gather towards Jesus, as they come to Jesus, to be united with Jesus, watch what happens to each other, to the blue dots. So just click once, Linda, on the next slide. I worked hard on that, just by the way.

But do you notice what happens? As people gather to Christ, you actually gather to one another. And as you're united to Christ, what happens? Well, you're united to each other. You can't come to Jesus without coming to each other, is Paul's point. You see, when we become Christians, we're not only united to Jesus, but we are united to one another. We are part of one family. That's what Paul means in verse 19, where he says, consequently, because of all this, you are no longer foreigners, no longer strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household. So we've been brought together through Christ. We are united together as one family, one household. And so if that's who we are in Christ, then should we not meet together to express who we are? Should we not meet together as God's family, Sunday by Sunday, because that's who we are spiritually, God's family united together.

[14:42] You see, as we answer the question, what is the Christian church? We also see the answers to why go to church. At first, we saw that we are God's gathering in Christ. And God has done everything needed, including giving his only son to save us and bring us into his church. That's who we are.

And so we are to express that by meeting together as God's church, Sunday by Sunday. A second, we've just seen that we are spiritually united together as God's family. And so we are to express our unity with each other by gathering together as God's family. And thirdly, though, we are actually already gathered in heaven spiritually. And so we had expressed that physically here on earth, Sunday by Sunday. And it's here I want us to turn to Hebrews chapter 12, which is our last reference. So Hebrews chapter 12, page 12, 14.

Here, the writer of Hebrews is comparing and contrasting the Old Testament church that met at Mount Sinai, with the New Testament church. And so verse 18, he says, you have not come to a mountain, that's Mount Sinai, that can be touched, a physical mountain, and that is burning with fire, just like we heard from our first reading, to darkness, gloom and storm, to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them. Because they could not bear what was commanded, that even if an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned to death. The sight was so terrifying that even Moses said, I am trembling with fear. You see, the writer here starts off by talking about what happened when God saved the Israelites. He saved them from Egypt, and then he brought them to Mount Sinai, you remember.

And there he gathered them for church, to speak to them as church. In fact, on the next slide, it even uses the word. So in Deuteronomy chapter 9, it says, Moses says, the Lord gave me two stone tablets, the Ten Commandments, inscribed by the finger of God. And on them were all the commandments the Lord proclaimed to you on the mountain, out of the fire, on the day of the church.

The assembly, same word. You see, they had church at Mount Sinai, and God spoke to them there. The problem was, as Hebrews puts it, it was so scary that the people begged for this church to

finish early. Now, I know all sorts of people who wish church would finish early, but not because they are scared of the speaker. But the Israelites were so scared that verse 19, they begged no further word be spoken to them. And so they asked Moses to be their mediator. And he would listen to God, and then tell the people what God said. But the New Testament church is different.

[17 : 47] It's not just gathered on earth Sunday by Sunday, it's actually permanently gathered in heaven. See verse 22? He says, but you've not come to the mountain of Mount Sinai, but you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, to the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. You see, heaven here is described as Mount Zion, or the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of God.

But it is also described as church. Did you realize? Heaven is church. Now you might be thinking that, you know, if heaven is permanently church, I'm not sure if I want to go there. But notice it's a joyful assembly, isn't it? And notice that while we come to God, the judge of all, we also come to Jesus, whose blood speaks a better word than the blood of Abel's. Now you remember the story of Cain and Abel in the Bible, Genesis chapter 4, Cain kills Abel, and his blood cries out from the ground for justice and judgment. But Jesus's blood is shed on the cross, and it cries out for mercy and forgiveness.

For it is by Jesus's blood that we are mercifully forgiven. In other words, the better word that Jesus speaks is the gospel. And so as we come to God, the judge of all, we have nothing to fear, because Christ's blood has paid for our sins. But do you notice verses 22 and 23? Can you see there? What phrase is repeated three times in those verses? What phrase is repeated three times in those verses? You have come. Thank you. I should have said you're allowed to call out at this point. Yeah, you have come. Now is that past, present, or future tense? You have come. It's past tense, isn't it? In other words, we are already spiritually in church.

[20 : 12] We've already come to the church in heaven. And like we saw from Ephesians, we have been spiritually raised with Christ, past tense. We have been seated with Christ in heaven. And Hebrews tells us that this means we are spiritually in the heavenly church, gathered around Christ to hear him speak the gospel to us. That's where we are spiritually. That's where we belong. We are part of the heavenly church. And if that's who we are spiritually, then we are to express that physically, by meeting Sunday by Sunday here at church. You see, we gather together around Christ Sunday by Sunday to hear him speak the word of the gospel through the Bible and to respond by joyfully serving him with thankfulness, obedience, and awe through song, prayer, and loving one another.

Because that's what we're doing in heaven, gathered around Christ to hear him speak. Do you see, who we are as God's church actually tells us why we should go to church. Do you see that?

You see, what does a member of the choir do? We're going to see it in action in a moment. What does a member of the choir do? Well, don't they come and sing with the choir?

A member of the choir who never gathers together with the choir to sing isn't much of a member, are they? Well, it's like that here. We are already gathered. We are members of the heavenly church.

And so if we never gather here on earth, then we're not expressing who we are spiritually. Some may say, well, if we're always in church in heaven, then there's no need to come to church on earth.

[22 : 03] But as I said, it's like being a member of a choir who never turns up to sing with the choir. It's like being a member of a football team, but never turning up to play football.

It's like being a member of an orchestra, but never turning up to play music with them. Or like being a member of a family, but never turning up to meet with them. You see, we are members of the heavenly church.

And so we are to turn up Sunday by Sunday to express who we are physically on earth, who we are spiritually in heaven. We don't come to church in order to be a Christian, but we come to church because we are Christians, already gathered together in Christ, in heaven.

You see, going to church is fundamentally linked to who we are as Christians. And so can I say to you this morning, well done for coming to church.

You are expressing physically who you are spiritually. Members of God's family, united together as family in Christ and gathered together around Christ in heaven.

[23 : 14] So let's pray that we might keep expressing physically who we are spiritually. Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly father, we do thank you for these truths, which may be hard to understand.

It is sometimes hard to understand how we are spiritually raised with Christ and gathered around him in heaven. Yet we know that it is true because we have been saved by you and given your spirit who unites us to Christ, but also unites us to one another.

And so, Father, we pray that you would help us to express who we are as your church by gathering Sunday by Sunday to be your church. And, Father, we pray these things in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[24 : 29] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.