

The Church

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[0 : 00] Jack and Grace met through a mutual friend. From day one, they seemed to be perfect for each other. Grace was everything that Jack had always wanted.

She was beautiful and outgoing and caring, always there when Jack needed her. For the first... I might get one of those other microphones, is that alright? Grace was beautiful, outgoing and caring. She was always there for whatever Jack needed her. For the first five months, they were just inseparable. Jack could hardly think of anything but Grace.

He didn't need to look further. He told his friends. He said, she's the one. Now, almost three years have passed, and Jack still enjoys the comfort and the familiarity of being with Grace.

But the spark's gone. Grace's flaws are just a little bit more obvious. He's not sure he finds her as attractive as he once did.

[1 : 08] And he's beginning to resent all the time that she wants to spend with him. One day, when she asks if they can define the nature of their relationship, Jack blows up.

We're together, aren't we? He says angrily. Why is that not enough for you? Obviously, Jack isn't ready for commitment.

He's not sure he ever will be, nor ever wants to be. I wonder if you've ever been in a relationship like that.

I wonder if you know of people who are in relationships like that. I can think of a couple. Let me say, if you are in a relationship like that, that is not God's purpose for your life.

God wants you to be in a relationship defined by both passion and commitment. And the reality is, there are millions of Jacks walking around on the face of the earth today.

[2 : 22] But before I go on any further, let me just give you one more piece of information that you should know. Grace isn't a girl. Grace is a church.

And this, unfortunately, is the let's define the nature relationship talk. The ethic of personal autonomy shapes the minds, the expectations, and the worldviews of most Australians.

And regrettably, this ethic has permeated the Australian church. There is little, in fact, it's not just the Australian church in terms of the culture.

It's one of the things that's happening with this pandemic at the moment as to why places like Singapore and Hong Kong can contain it so well. But in the Western world, it explodes. In our minds, there is little thought given to our statement from the Apostles' Creed today.

I believe in one holy, Catholic, and apostolic church and the communion of saints. Now, if you've just joined us today, then we're working our way through the ancient statement of Christian belief called the Apostles' Creed.

[3 : 45] And this short statement captures the way that Christians view God, the world, the life, future. It's our worldview, if you like.

And so today, I'm picking up what Christians believe about the church. I've got three things I want us to explore. If you've got a phone or an iPad or a handout in front of you, you'll see there three main points.

What is the church? What's the purpose of the church? And how to be a purposeful church member? So what's the first point? What is the church?

The word church in our New Testament comes from the Greek word ecclesia. It's used just under 80 times in the New Testament and only on three occasions in the New Testament is the word ecclesia not translated into the English word church.

For instance, in Acts 19, an idol-making silversmith named Demetrius whips the whole city up into a riot because too many of his customers were turning from idolatry to faith in the Lord Jesus and therefore not buying his produce.

[5 : 05] And next thing you know, there's this large crowd that's gathered and it says in Acts 19, 32, the assembly was in confusion.

Some were shouting one thing, some another and most people didn't even know why they were there. So it seems like a sensible kind of mob really. The word assembly there is the Greek word ecclesia.

The word church at its core simply refers to a crowd of people gathered together. Sometimes in the New Testament, churches used to refer to the gathering of Christians around God in heaven. Theologians refer to this as the invisible church. Everyone who knows Jesus from every time and place, those who are alive and those who are dead are gathered spiritually in God's presence, united in Jesus, magnifying God.

That's the invisible church. And if you are in Jesus now, if you're a Christian, spiritually, you're connected to that universal church currently gathering in the throne room around God.

[6 : 28] That's the invisible church. mostly, however, the words in the New Testament refer to the local church gathered in a particular place, like the church that gathers on the corner of Fuller's Road and View Street, Chatswood.

The local church. Us. This is the church visible. never in the New Testament is the word ecclesia used to describe a location, a building, or an institution, or even a collection of local churches. And so, you could say, well, the church is just a mob on one level. But, the church is not just any mob or crowd gathered together.

The Greek word ecclesia is made from two other Greek words and joined together. These words mean to call out.

The word church really refers to those called out by God, called out by God, joined together as his people, the followers of his son, Jesus.

[7 : 53] And Matthew 18, which Peter read out to us, is where we see the foundation of the church. We see this theology starting there. This is what separates this particular gathering of people from all other gatherings of people.

Matthew 16, 13 to 19, people, Jesus asks his disciples, who do people say I am?

And they come up with all sorts of different answers. Jesus says, well, what about you? And Peter confesses the identity of who Jesus is. Peter says that Jesus is more than a prophet, he's more than a teacher, he is the son of the living God, the Messiah.

He is the promised seed of the woman from Genesis 3. And Jesus then responds with an announcement that will change the course of human history.

He says, upon Peter's word, not Peter the person, but upon his word, his confession, he will build his church, his gathering.

[9 : 15] Why is Peter's word not Peter the person? Because the whole context tells you it's about who Jesus is, not who Peter is, it's about the identity of Jesus.

Who do people say I am? And in the very next section, Peter gets it totally wrong and tries to stop Jesus from going on the cross in the first place. So Peter hasn't fully grasped it. Upon Peter's confession, he will build his church.

Where Peter's confession of the true identity of Jesus Christ is found, the church is found. Where this confession is proclaimed, you find the communion of saints.

Entrance into God's church, church, his crowd, his mob begins with the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord, Son of the living God.

All who make that confession, by God's grace, become his people and unite themselves to Christ and his body, the church. It's by God's grace because Peter's confession was gifted to him by God himself, as Jesus said.

[10 : 34] This all means that when a church fails to hold to this truth and declare this truth and embody this truth, they forfeit their status as a church of Christ.

And they become a mob, a crowd. As theologian J.R. Packer puts it in his very short book, Affirming the Apostles Creed, he says, the church is a supernatural society of God's redeemed and baptized people, looking back to Christ's first coming with gratitude and on to his second coming with hope.

That's the first point, that's what the church is. So what's the purpose of church? Matthew 16 would also suggest the church has a specific purpose. It alludes to it in the second half of verse 18 where we read, the gates of Hades will not overcome it, I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, whatever you bind on earth you will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be

loosed in heaven.

So Peter's confession insists that the church be built on the truth of the gospel, but Jesus also endows his body with an insurmountable power, a power that Satan himself cannot overturn even by death.

And this authority is given to the church that the church might carry out its God-given duties and that is to shine the light of the glory of Jesus Christ to a lost and dying world.

[12:32] That's his purpose. So let's unpack that purpose a little bit. We'll see, and I want to jump into Ephesians chapter 1. So if you've got your Bibles in front of you, you're going to run through some of Ephesians to see some of what God's intention is for his church.

So Ephesians 1 verse 8, we see, if you like, the end of the plan of the gathered church. With all wisdom and understanding, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfillment. Here it is, to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ. That's the end of it all. That's the goal. That's where everything is going. Everything gathered together around Jesus. There's that word gathering again.

Gathered together around Jesus. It's been God's plan all along. In the Garden of Eating, there's a real sense right at the beginning that things are gathered to God.

[13:45] He has made the garden and all is at peace and ordered and everything is in perfect relationship with God. And then the first people make the decision to live their way and make everything about them.

And the Bible calls this attitude and this action sin. And the consequence of sin is that everything is disordered. There's no more harmony.

There's no more peace. Relationship is broken. And where there was unity and closeness, now because of sin, there's distance and disunity.

God judges sin by scattering his people. Scattering people from himself. And this is a principle that you'll see right throughout the entire Bible.

Bible, when humanity sets itself up against God, he scatters them. Whenever humanity sets itself up against God, he scatters them.

[14:57] When he rescues them, he brings them to himself. He gathers them to himself. In Isaiah 11, 700 years before Jesus, Isaiah is looking forward to the day when everything is finally ordered and harmonious and peaceful and right relationship like it was in the beginning.

And he refers to a particular person who will accomplish God's grand plan. God's grand and he calls the Messiah, a son of King David.

And this is what he says in verse 12 of Isaiah 11. He will raise a banner for the nations and gather the exiles of Israel. He will assemble the scattered people of Judea from the four quarters of the earth.

And a little later in Isaiah chapter 56, God declares that it's not just for his people, but this promise is expanded beyond Israel.

When he says, I will gather still others to them besides those already gathered. And the climax of God's plan is revealed in Isaiah 66.

[16:14] And I, because of what they have planned and done, am about to come and gather the people of all nations and languages and they will come and see my glory.

You see, God's plan is to gather people from all nations and tribes and languages and people groups and cultures to himself that they might see his glory and live forever.

forever. And what Peter confesses in Matthew 16 is that Jesus is the one that Isaiah talked about. Jesus is the focal point of God's gathering of people that they might see the glory of God. Jesus is central to God's plan of bringing people back to each other and to their creator.

And Ephesians 2, if you're working with through Ephesians with me, is the long-awaited plan being worked out with Jesus at the heart of it. Verse 11, we read, therefore, remember that formally, you who are Gentiles by birth and called the uncircumcised by those who call themselves circumcision, which is done in the body by human hands, remember that at that time you were separated from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the covenants of the promise without hope and without God in the world.

[17:51] What Paul does there in Ephesians 2 is he highlights this massive division between Jews and Gentiles, but also between them and God. Deep, deep hostility.

And then in the very next verse he shows how that hostility is overcome. Now in Christ Jesus, you who once were far away, scattered from God, have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one, destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility, by setting aside in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His 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. Sin and death and hostility between Jews and Gentiles is finally dealt with by the Messiah, the son of the living God, Jesus on a cross 2,000 years ago.

[19 : 07] Jesus is the one who gathers these diverse groups of people together into one new humanity in relationship with their creator God. God's purpose in all of this?

What is the idea? What's his plan? Ephesians 3, 10, read out to us by Tom. His intent was that now through the church, that's us, that word there, Ecclesia, is talking about us, local gathering, God's God's manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly realms according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. God's great and glorious plan is to bring a very diverse group of people together and to himself in such a way that his greatness and his glory is made known everywhere including the heavenly realms.

There is a sense where God calls over the rulers and the authorities of the heavenly realms, gets them to look over the balcony of heaven if such a place exists and says look at that, look at that. See St. Paul's Chatswood? That is what I've been working on for all of history. My son Jesus has made that possible.

[20 : 46] United Nations can't do it. He's the one who's brought down those dividing walls of hostility and brought diverse people together and he turns to Satan, hey, enemy, get over here.

He says, see that? You cannot prevail against that. You cannot stop that. My son is building his church out of every tribe and language and peoples.

people. And so let me just say, as a society of individualistic thinkers where personal autonomy rules and a highest value, this is very important for us to grasp.

Before church has anything to do with you and me, before church is about us serving one another or even before church is about us learning more about God, it is about him and his glory.

It's why we start with singing and singing in such a way that we actually believe it. this is so fundamental for us to grasp.

[22 : 17] It's critical even. Before church is about me or about you or about us, it is about God. It is about his design, his plan for all of time and eternity.

A multi-ethnic, multi-generational, socially, socio-economically diverse gathering of people, declaring that Jesus is Lord and King for the glory of God is the reason St.

Paul's Chatswood exists. And it's about more and more people being added for that purpose, for the glory of God.

And all of our resources are to be deployed in that direction. this building, you've got to get this deep down into your souls. This building is not a church.

This building is a tool. It is nothing more than a tool. It's a resource to help the church, us, to pursue its mission for the glory of God.

[23 : 35] God, this building is not even our clubhouse where we gather. It's not about us having a nice place for us to gather and facilities and room to spread out and kick back and enjoy.

It's our mission headquarters to see God's reason for us gathering fulfilled. Okay. number three, how to be a purposeful church member.

So how do we as individuals be members of a church on purpose? Firstly, let me say, you don't become a member of God's church by completing a membership course or going to a Welcome Sunday event.

Although I'm not suggesting you don't go at all. you don't become a member of a church by sitting in a pew for a very long time either.

Longevity's got nothing to do with your membership of a church. You become a member of God's church by doing what we saw in Matthew 16, by repenting of living independent of God, by putting your trust in the Lord, Jesus Christ declaring that he is the son of the living God and receiving the Holy Spirit who unites you with God and all other Christians from time and eternity.

[25 : 08] That's how you become a member of his church. And that is the fundamental first step. There will be people, just to emphasize this point, there will be people in heaven who have not done a pathways, a course, who have never been to a Welcome Sunday event, but there won't be anyone in heaven who hasn't repented of their sins and trusted in Jesus Christ as son of the living God.

Not a single one. And potentially you're here today and this is the fundamental first step that you need to take.

and if that is you, then come to the Welcome Center. We would love to speak to you. Secondly, and this is going to sound somewhat ironic, being a purposeful church member means that you gather because that's what you've been called to do.

You've been called to gather. together. Because you are spiritually gathered by God. One of the core values that helps us think about the sort of gathering that we are and inspire to be is our core value of treasuring Jesus together.

It says this, having been led individually by the Spirit of God to receive Christ Jesus Lord, Savior and supreme treasure of our lives, we now most solemnly and joyfully enter into covenant with one another as one body in Christ.

[26 : 45] We believe the people whom Jesus has called into relationship with himself are his church and not an institution or a building. In an age of individualism, we value vigilance and accountability.

In treasuring Jesus together. In Ephesians, Paul spends extensive time on what God's new humanity, his gathering, his church looks like in their life together.

And our value of treasuring Jesus together is a value that tries to capture some of that in terms of the quality of who we are as God's people. It's about our life together. It's about our relationships. It's about our togetherness as a dynamic spiritual community under the lordship of Jesus. It says things like this as a church, we are committed to making corporate worship a weekly priority, unless of course I shut them all down.

In the Bible, to magnify God always requires the regular gathering of God's people. And so, if or maybe when that decision is made for us not to gather, that is not the normal pattern for us.

[28 : 00] That will never be the normal pattern for us. It will be out of love for our community. And we're working on specific ways where we can still gather, even if it's via a screen, in order to declare the praises of God as his people and to hear from him.

So I want to ask you, first of all, have you ever calculated how many gatherings you miss in a year? Ever done that? Regular attendance now for churches has become somewhere between 30 and 40 percent attendance across a year.

Now, I don't need a rule here. And I'm not looking to implement a rule here because you'll just go to the next church that doesn't have that rule. The only way for there to be radical change is radical change in the heart.

What we need to see is the greatness and the gracious plan of a great and a gracious God. We need to see that all of history is about God's glory and the church of Jesus Christ is central to that. We need to see what it cost him to gather us together and to gather us to himself. Frankly, nothing else will motivate us.

[29 : 31] Second point, under point three, is to build supernatural community. Treasuring Jesus together not only says that we value being together, but how we value being together.

We're committed to gathering in small groups, remembering one another in prayer and aiding one another in sickness and distress and cultivating sympathy, Christian sympathy and joy and being slow to take offense and always seeking reconciliation and mindful of the need and of the fact that command of our Savior to secure it without delay.

We want to be a church that's welcoming of people of every background. We don't want to have cliquishness in our groups. We want to purge our lives of sin that cause division. We want to pursue increasingly visible and authentic practical ways of loving each other and our community.

But frankly, the best thing to do is to look at what the New Testament says about our supernatural life together. John 13, a new commandment I give you.

This is Jesus. Love one another as I have loved you so that you must love one another. By all this, by this, all people will know that you are my disciples if you love one another.

[30 : 44] Romans 12, be devoted to one another in brotherly love. James, do not slander one another. Don't grumble against one another. Confess your sins to each other. Pray for one another. And that's just a snapshot.

What is obvious from the New Testament is the prominence of loving, Christ-exalting, other person-centered personal relationship in the local church.

There is no such thing as isolated, individually sick, meet-my-needs consumer Christianity in the Bible at all.

Not even a glimpse of it. You can't even play exegetical gymnastics and come to any form of conclusion on that.

Anywhere. What we are seeking to do at St. Paul's is build a gospel-centered community. Another way of putting that is we are seeking to build a supernatural community, not a natural community.

[31 : 47] A natural community is where people feel connected because of demographic closeness and connectedness. They gravitate to each other and they find a sense of belonging because they've got similarities and irrespective of whether the gospel is true or not, you can do that.

Now, that's not a bad thing. All of my friends that I've got, I share common interests with them. Not a bad thing to have those connections and affinities here at St. Paul's.

But I want us to caution about thinking that somehow that that is the total sum of gospel community. At the end of the day, you can have natural community without Jesus.

The heavenly realms look on and see the wisdom of God when they gaze upon supernatural community. Gospel community.

And so we seek diversity. We seek shared discomfort in all of our corporate gatherings. This is the kind of community that could really only exist when Jesus is Lord of all.

[33 : 00] And we have the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit to drive us away from self-centeredness. It's when people who would not gravitate to each other or people groups who have open hostility towards one another are drawn together in peace and love because of the work of Jesus Christ in their hearts.

Thirdly, having said that, about that, third thing about being a purposeful church member is to purposely fracture community. Bear with me here.

It is great to be part of a gospel community that God is growing. And one of the painful realities of God growing a community is that we have to keep fracturing in order to make space for others who are being welcomed in.

We should see that as a joy. In the same way, I remember having one child and not sure how I was going to work with two children. And then you discover the joy of having two and then a third.

And not sure how. It resulted in all kinds of different changes. But the joy of welcoming more people in. And so we've got to be a church that's building deep relationships, but also seeing that deep relationships in themselves are not the goal.

[34 : 29] People being connected to their God is the goal. And therefore, we need to fracture some of those relationships to allow room for more to come in. There are a few metaphors that the Bible uses to describe the intimate way that Jesus views his church.

He calls it his family, his body, his bride. He loves his church and he gave himself over to death for it. He looks forward to the day when his bride, in all its perfection, will be presented to him and be with him forever.

And as I said at the beginning, today is one of those commitment conversations. If you're a Christian, you have a crucial part in God's plan for eternity.

Your life, and I think this is what I want to get hopefully in showing you how the Bible, all the Bible views the idea of gathering as his people. I want you to get this picture.

Your life is so much bigger than a good job, an understanding spouse, non-delinquent kids or even having kids, good friends and active social life.

[35 : 50] It is so much bigger than beautiful gardens and nice holidays and fashionable clothes. If you're a Christian, you are part of something immense that will never end.

Something that began before you were born and continued long after you die. God is rescuing fallen, scattered humanity and gathering to him himself and progressively shaping them into the likeness of his much-loved son, Jesus.

He gathers you to himself so that you may take part in his glory and find your joy in his glory.

The church matters because God chose it to show and tell the universe his wisdom and love. And this message is our world's only hope.

And so we must fight the toxicity and the poison of modern church culture that says that you can walk this Christian life without the church.

[37 : 12] It is not true. Individualism not only betrays the church, it betrays the gospel, it takes glory from God, it insinuates that the glorious good news of the Lord Jesus Christ is only about saving people, it's only a gospel of sin management, there is such a bigger story.

God is creating an eternal people. God's design throughout history from beginning to end is about him creating an eternal people from every tribe, tongue, language and group.

one people are people for his pleasure. So let me ask you, if I ask you to tell your story of your journey to and growth in faith in the Lord Jesus, how central is the church to that story?

Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen.