

A stylized stained glass window illustration composed of various colored glass pieces (teal, orange, yellow, green, brown) forming a geometric pattern. In the center, there is a white rectangular panel containing the text "THE CHURCH".

THE CHURCH

—THE—
CHURCH



Golden Hills Community Church
Visit us online @goldenhills.org

OUR PURPOSE: To glorify God by making disciples
who will impact every area of the world for Christ.

OUR PROCESS: We believe disciples can best be made
when they Worship, Grow, and Serve in the context
of Christian Community.

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The Church

WELCOME

TO THE STUDY

“There are two things we cannot do alone. One is to be married and the other is be a Christian.” I first read those words by Paul Tournier in a book by Philip Yancey called *Church: Why Bother?* I was 20 years old and had not been a Christian very long—about a year and a half. I can still remember sitting in my dorm room wondering whether or not that quote was true. Do I need other people to be a faithful Christian?

Not growing up in the church meant I had no context for understanding its role in my life. I did not know why church mattered or how it could matter. I was so preoccupied with learning the meaning of Christian idioms that I didn’t spend much time learning about the church. In short, whatever I knew about the church was shaped more by my experiences and preferences than by anything I studied in the Bible.

“There are two things we cannot do alone. One is to be married and the other is be a Christian.”

– PAUL TOURNIER

Ecclesiology is the name for the subject of theology that focuses on the church. It covers such topics as the purpose and mission of the church, baptism and the Lord’s Supper, membership, church government, and marks of a true church. It wasn’t until I studied ecclesiology that I realized I had a poor biblical understanding of the church. And there was one specific question that haunted me. It was put to me by a pastor and professor I knew who asked, “what do we miss if we neglect involvement in a local church?” I answered him honestly, “I don’t know, exactly.” He replied, “you don’t know what you miss because you don’t know what is to be gained!”

In conjunction with the sermons, I hope this study will give you a better understanding of ecclesiology. Although the church seems unremarkably ordinary, it is significantly more glorious than you may realize. So I invite you to join me in prayerfully studying God’s beautiful church. There is much to gain!



Pastor Phil Ward

HOW TO USE THIS STUDY GUIDE

Goals of This Study Guide

The goal of this Study Guide is to help our congregation understand the significance of the Church, specifically the local church. This will be done as we explore a systematic study of how the Bible—especially the New Testament—describes and defines how the people of God are to assemble.

The Format of this Study Guide

Each week the study will help us discover:

- What a passage says about that topic
(OUR CASE STUDY)
- What that idea meant in the Bible
(THE HISTORIC-UNIVERSAL CHURCH)
- How to apply that idea to our context
(THE MODERN-LOCAL CHURCH)
- Encouragement to our congregation
(EXHORTATION TO GHCC)

OUR CASE STUDY

We have presented a biblical story or passage that will help us understand this week's topic.

THE HISTORIC-UNIVERSAL CHURCH

The HISTORIC-UNIVERSAL CHURCH section provides a theological overview of that week's topic. This will usually focus on the CASE STUDY passage, as well as exploring other passages.

THE MODERN-LOCAL CHURCH

In the MODERN-LOCAL CHURCH section, we are exploring how this topic applies to us, specifically in the context of Golden Hills.

EXHORTATION TO GHCC

Our writers are sending us off with an encouragement to live out this week's theme.

How to Use This Guide in Your Small Groups

GROUP MEMBERS:

- Before the Sunday message read-through (and complete) that week's content in the Study Guide.
- Bring your Study Guide on Sunday and take notes that might help you better understand the topic.
- Use the passage, the Sermon Notes (provided online or at the church on Sundays), or this Study Guide as a daily devotional.
- Some weeks the Study Guide will help emphasize the sermon's specific points, and some weeks it might focus on areas of a topic that the sermon can't address.
- Continue to ask God to bless our congregation as we study *The Church*, and pray for the members of your Small Group, our church community, and our local community.

GROUP LEADERS:

- Consider integrating the Sermon Notes questions with the Study Guide (these are available at church on Sundays, or online at goldenhills.org).
- You may choose to open your group time with a brief discussion about the thrust of the previous sermon and ask your group what kind of connections they were able to make (to the topic, the sermon, etc.).
- Don't feel pressured to discuss every page of the Study Guide.
- The "Review Questions" at the end of the **HISTORIC-UNIVERSAL CHURCH** section are meant to make sure the participant understood the information in that section. The "Application Questions" at the end of the **MODERN-LOCAL CHURCH** section should be the main point of application and conversation within the group.
- Make the goal of each study to identify:
 1. The main theme of the topic.
 2. How we understand Jesus in light of the topic.
 3. How we live our lives (today) in light of numbers 1 and 2.
- Always follow the Spirit's leading and be sensitive to His direction during any given group meeting.

A Sample Small Group Discussion:

- Opening prayer.
- Ask the group if they had any questions about the topic.
- Ask the group how they would summarize the topic (what's the main point?). Remember not to get bogged down with details, only to then miss the actual point of the passage.
- Ask the group what made an impact with them, either because they discovered the original meaning of the topic, or because of a breakthrough in their own lives through personal application.
- Go through the “Responding Questions” at the end of each week’s Study Guide, and discuss any impact, conviction, or challenge they’ve had in applying these truths to their lives.
- Ask the group for prayer requests.
- Have the group pray for their requests.



STUDY RESOURCES

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Grudem, Wayne, *Systematic Theology, second edition: An introduction to biblical doctrine* (Zondervan, 2020)

Akin, Daniel, L., *A Theology for the Church* (B&H Academic, 2014)

BIBLE STUDY TOOLS

Burge, Gary, and Hill, Andrew E., *The Baker Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Baker, 2012)

Wenham, Gordon J., and Motyer, Alec. *New Bible Commentary* (IVP Academic, 1994)

Keener, Craig S., *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (IVP Academic, 2014)

Brand, Chad, *The Holman Illustration Bible Dictionary* (Holman, 2015)

Burge, Gary M., *The New Testament in Antiquity: A Survey of the New Testament Within Its Cultural Contexts* (Zondervan, 2009)

STUDY BIBLES

ESV Study Bible (Crossway, 2014)

NIV Biblical Theology Study Bible, edited by D.A. Carson (Zondervan, 2018)

NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible (Zondervan, 2016)

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY

Hunter, Trent, and Wellum, Stephen. *Christ from Beginning to End: How the Full Story of Scripture Reveals the Full Glory of Christ* (Zondervan, 2018)

FREE ONLINE RESOURCES

biblegateway.com

biblestudytools.com

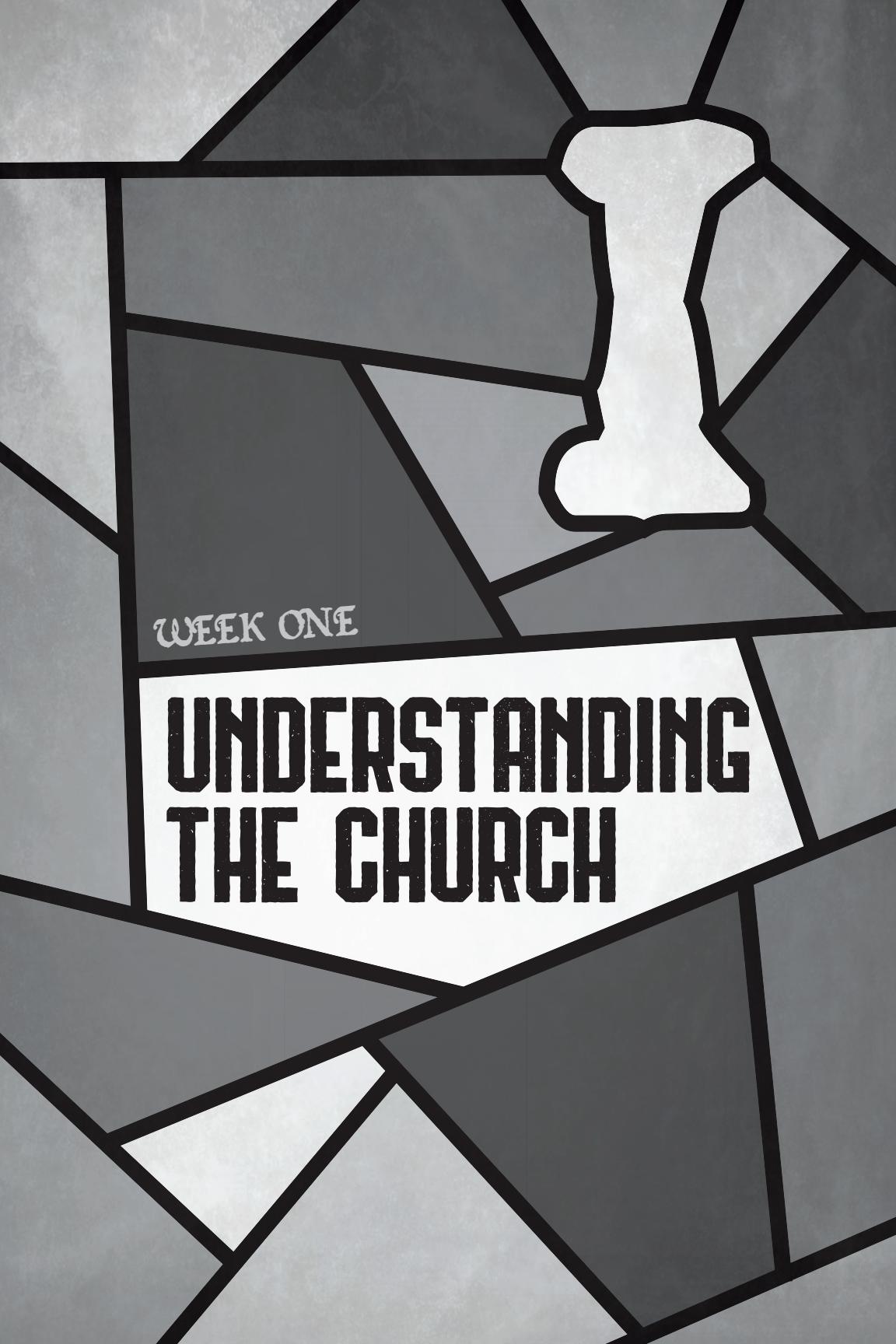
biblicaltraining.org

ccel.org

Recommended Resources By Week

We have provided additional resources for each week. If you found one of the weeks particularly interesting, you may want to dive deeper by reading one of these books. **Note:** While we generally agree with these authors, there might be distinctions that we hold at GHCC that would differ from these dear brothers.

- Week 1** Dever, Mark, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (B&H Publishing, 2012)
- Week 2** Wright, Christopher, J.H., *The Mission of God's People: A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission* (Zondervan, 2010)
- Week 3** Lawrence, Michael, *Conversion: How God Creates a People* (Crossway, 2017)
- Week 4** Dever, Mark, *Discipling: How to Help Others Follow Jesus* (Crossway, 2016)
- Week 5** Welch, Ed, *Created to Draw Near: Our Life as God's Royal Priests* (Crossway, 2020)
- Week 6** Merkle, Benjamin, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Kregel, 2007)
- Week 7** Leeman, Jonathan, *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus* (Crossway, 2012)
- Week 8** Jamieson, Bobby, *Understanding Baptism* (B&H Books, 2016)
- Week 9** Chester, Tim, *Truth We Can Touch: How Baptism and Communion Shape Our Lives*
- Week 10** Anyabwile, Thabiti, M., *What is a Healthy Church Member?* (Crossway, 2008)
- Week 11** Merker, Matt, *Corporate Worship: How the Church Gathers as God's People* (Crossway, 2021)
- Week 12** Beale, G.K., *God Dwells Among Us: Expanding Eden to the Ends of the Earth* (IVP Books, 2014)

A large, stylized graphic of a stained glass window is the background for the entire image. It features a grid of dark grey and black panels separated by thick black lines. A central, irregularly shaped panel is filled with a light grey color. The overall effect is a modern, abstract representation of a traditional religious icon.

WEEK ONE

UNDERSTANDING THE CHURCH

OUR CASE STUDY

Hebrews 10:19-25

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 24 And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, 25 not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.



1. The word *church* isn't used in this passage, but the concept is. Can you find it? (note: it's *not* in verse 21).
 2. What is the clear command for what the church is *not* to do?
 3. What is the purpose of the church gathering?

THE HISTORIC-UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Words matter. Obviously, they're the basis for how we communicate. Most words have what's known as a "semantic range," and even if you don't think you know what that means, you definitely know what it means. It just refers to all the different meanings one word can have. For instance, if we were to ask a room of 5 people what the word "set" means, we could get at least 5 completely different answers: 1. I *set* the cup on the table (when you're putting something in a position). 2. I *set* my phone to do a backup (when making equipment ready). 3. I *set* a date for vacation (when you're deciding something will happen). 4. I got a *set* interest rate on a loan (when the price or value of something is determined). 5. I watched the tennis *set* (the number of games in a tennis match). Usually, the context of the sentence will let us know the meaning of how the word is being used (within its possible range of meanings). But, sometimes, the original meaning can become hijacked, and the word takes on a new meaning that doesn't reflect the original. It's unfortunate that this is what has happened with the English word "**church**."

In Greek (the language of the New Testament), the word used for church is **ekklesia**. This is why a theological study on the church, like what we're doing now, is known as "**ecclesiology**" (the study of the church). In English, what we call "church" has a wide semantic range. For instance, we can, 1. Go to church (the facility at 2401 Shady Willow Ln.), 2. Do church (practice various liturgical things, like singing worship songs and listening to a message), or 3. Gather as a church (assemble as the members who make our congregational body). Unfortunately, number 3 is the way we use the word least in our modern times, even though it's actually the primary meaning in the Bible.

In the early English translation of the Bible done by William Tyndale (the 1530s), a passage like Matthew 16:18 was translated “...**upon this rock I will build my congregation.**”¹ If you notice, this is translated very differently from almost any other translation, as almost everything you’ll find will read, “**...upon this rock I will build my church.**” The problem is that the word “church” has come to mean “facility.” It’s a place to go, a location that’s used as a destination. The church is the place we attend a wedding. We welcome people “to” church (into the building), and we are careful to dress and behave in a reverent way—acting differently than when outside those walls. Our non-Christian friends joke that “if I were to walk into your church, I’d

be struck dead...” as if the building itself is magically transforms into the Ark of the Covenant from *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Is a church (facility) actually that special?

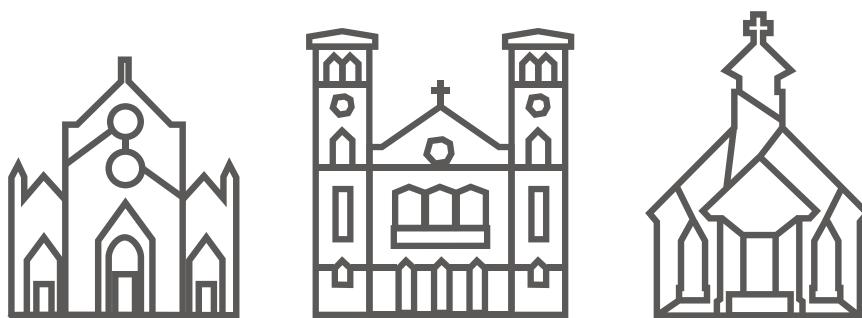
What about modern American churches that don’t have a permanent facility, the ones that rent out local public schools. Is that facility not as holy as a dedicated church facility? What happens when the multi-use room at the local high school holds a prom on Saturday night with hundreds of hormonal teenagers acting in debaucherous ways? When the church volunteers roll in at 6:00AM to set up, will that congregation have a lesser Holy Spirit experience because of the depraved acts that were occurring a mere few hours earlier?² *NO!* Even

¹ For readability sake, we have modified the Old English spelling of these words to reflect the modern English tongue.

² Note, the author of this week is literally drawing on an experience he had while being a member of a church that met in a high school multipurpose room...and yes, he served as a chaperone for the dance the night before.

though that facility might have been used in a depraved way the night before, the moment the people of God gather the Holy Spirit dwells among them, making them His temple. Once we start viewing our facilities, instead of the people, as “the church,” we begin to create idols and disconnect the biblical idea of *church*.

The Greek word *ekklesia* actually plays an important role throughout the entire Bible. The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, but in the period leading up to the first century (and the time of Jesus), Greek became the dominant language of the world.³ Egypt functioned for years as the hub of intellectual activity, and also had a large Jewish population due to the diaspora and exile of Jews during the Babylonian ransacking of Jerusalem (during the period of Daniel).⁴ It made sense to translate the Hebrew Old Testament into Greek, as Greek was becoming the language of the people. This means that the first translation of the Bible was actually the (Hebrew) Old Testament being translated into Greek. The name given to this translation is called the “Septuagint” (or to use the Roman numerals, the LXX). Why does this matter to our study? It’s because the way certain words are translated into the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) shows how the people of God, in the Old Testament or New, are seen as a people who gather. The Greek term *ekklesia* was that word used to describe God’s people—even in the Old Testament.



“Once we start viewing our facilities, instead of the people, as ‘the church,’ we begin to create idols and disconnect the biblical idea of church.”

For instance, in Numbers 20, we read about the death of Miriam (the older sister of Moses). The people stayed in the wilderness for her death and burial. However, they had no water and started complaining against Moses. Moses left the group to pray, and the *“glory of Yahweh appeared”* to him (**Num. 20:6**). Then, we read of that famous moment when God told Moses He would provide water anytime Moses told the rock to do so.

This is just one example of how the Septuagint (the Greek translation of Numbers) renders some of these terms. In 20:8 we read, *“Take the staff, and assemble the congregation, you and Aaron your brother, and tell the rock before their eyes to yield its water.”* What word is used for “assemble”? The verb form of the word *ekklesia*. Many times throughout the Old Testament Septuagint, the word *ekklesia* is used to describe what the people of God are doing. To be the people of God, regardless if it’s in the Old Testament or New Testament, or even in our modern times, means that God’s people are gathering.

³ Greek became the dominant language when Greek leader Alexander the Great conquered the world and demanded that all trade be done in the common tongue of Greek.

⁴ *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded* (2015, Holman Reference) p. 215

Review Questions

1. What's the basic definition of the Greek word *ekklesia*?
 2. How has the English translation of the word church changed over time?
 3. When the Old Testament was translated into Greek, what was the common word used to describe the people who gathered?



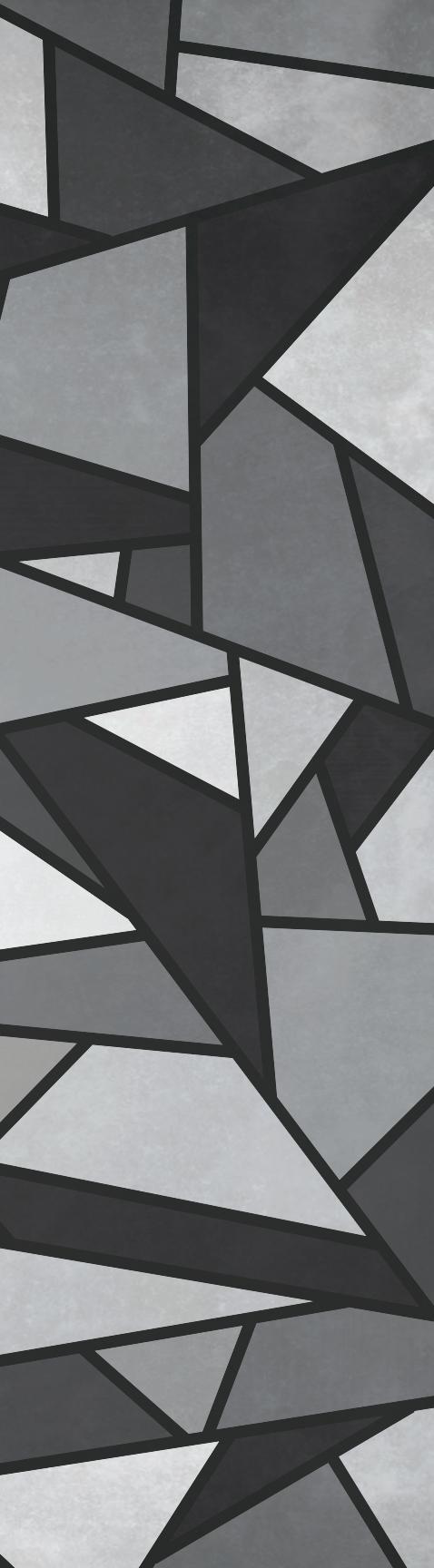
“To be the people of God, regardless if it’s in the Old Testament or New Testament, or even in our modern times, means that God’s people are gathering.”

THE MODERN-LOCAL CHURCH

As good Bible students, we have the duty to reclaim biblical words. One of those is the word *church*. It's not a bad word, but it's been hijacked to describe a location, not a people. This is damaging because a building literally adds zero to the value of a local congregation (or assembly). The church building is just a tool used to help us. If 2401 Shady Willow Lane were to burn to the ground, that literally would not affect our identity one bit.

So what is a church? It's the local, regular gathering of believers who have submitted and committed themselves to one another, under a God-ordained leadership who administers baptism and membership (the sacraments), and church discipline. A church is 100% made up of a congregation (or gathering, or assembly) of people. It's 0% a facility, although the facility might provide opportunities for executing our job description—to make disciples throughout the world.

The church (i.e., congregation, gathering, assembly, etc.) is made up of Christians—followers of the Messiah who acknowledge Christ as King, who are adopted members of His Kingdom. As Christians, we have a job description: to be **ambassadors** for Christ (2 Cor 5:20). Therefore, since the local church is made up of ambassadors, this makes local churches **embassies**. The local church exists as a small representation of the **Kingdom of God** in a foreign land.



This is what we will be focusing on for the next 11 weeks. We will see how the local church is to be ordered, what we do when we gather, who leads it, and what our mission is. We know that we are one of the millions of local congregations that have existed during the past two thousand years, and so we are merely participating in what Christians have been doing for generations. We are so excited to see how God will use this particular study to work within our local congregation to continue doing what faithful saints have been doing for millennia.

“The local church exists as a small representation of the Kingdom of God in a foreign land.”

Responding Questions

- 1. Personal Assessment:** How do you see yourself in relation to the local church? Are you a part of the body, or merely an observer of the body?

Do you take pride in having a function? Or, have you identified your function yet?

2. Group Conversation & Reflection: Prior to this week, how would you have described your own perspective on the word “church”?

Was it more based on a building or a people?

How does your own definition affect how you engage in the church?

3. Action Steps: If knowing that it is the *people* who are called to be the church (congregation, assembly, etc.), how might that change the way you think about the church?

What should your involvement look like?

What sort of duty do you have to the local church?

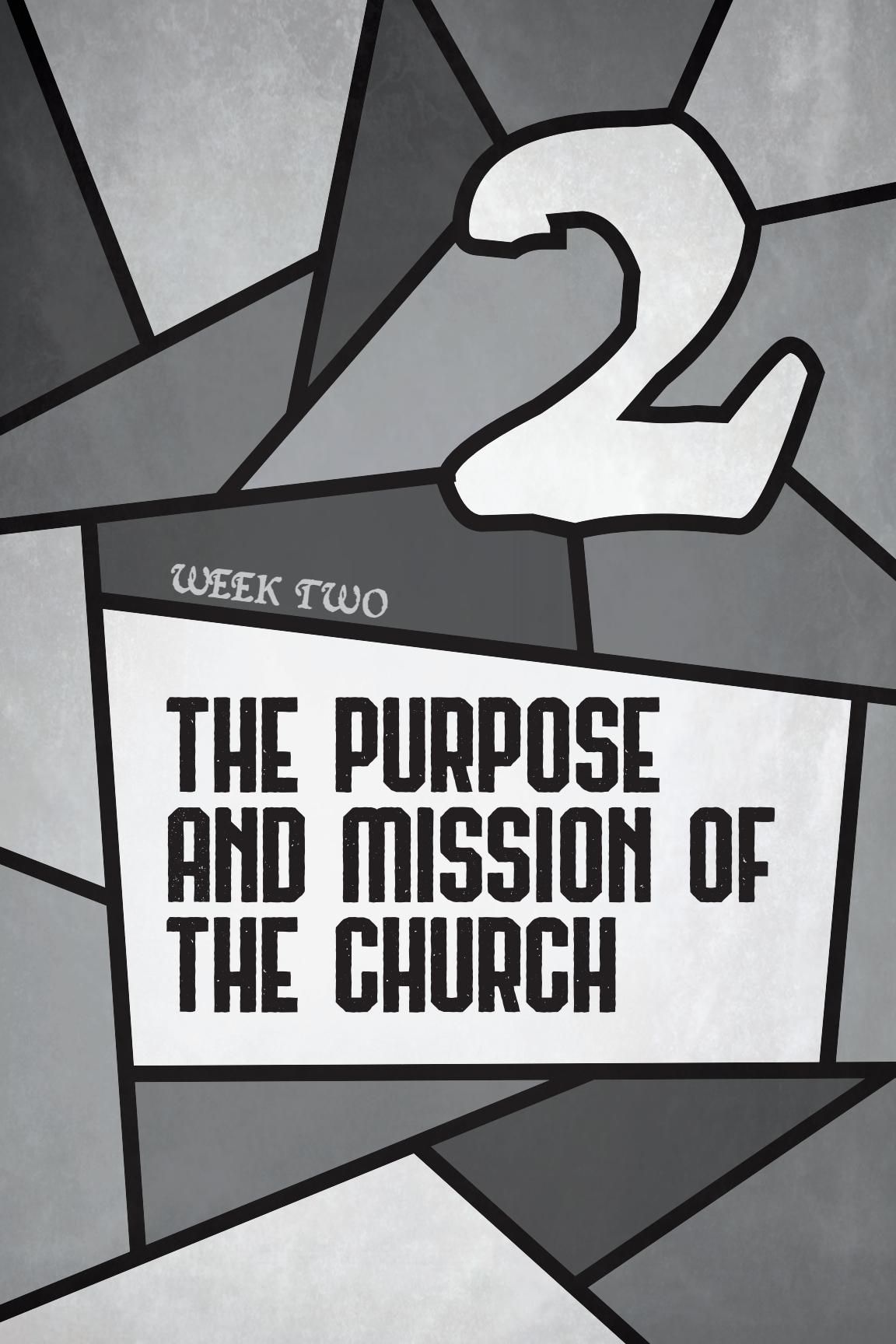
EXHORTATION

Let us be a local church that is known for our love for one another, is driven by the gospel, is united in Christ, and who seeks to make the name of Jesus great in all the world.



NOTES

Understanding the Church



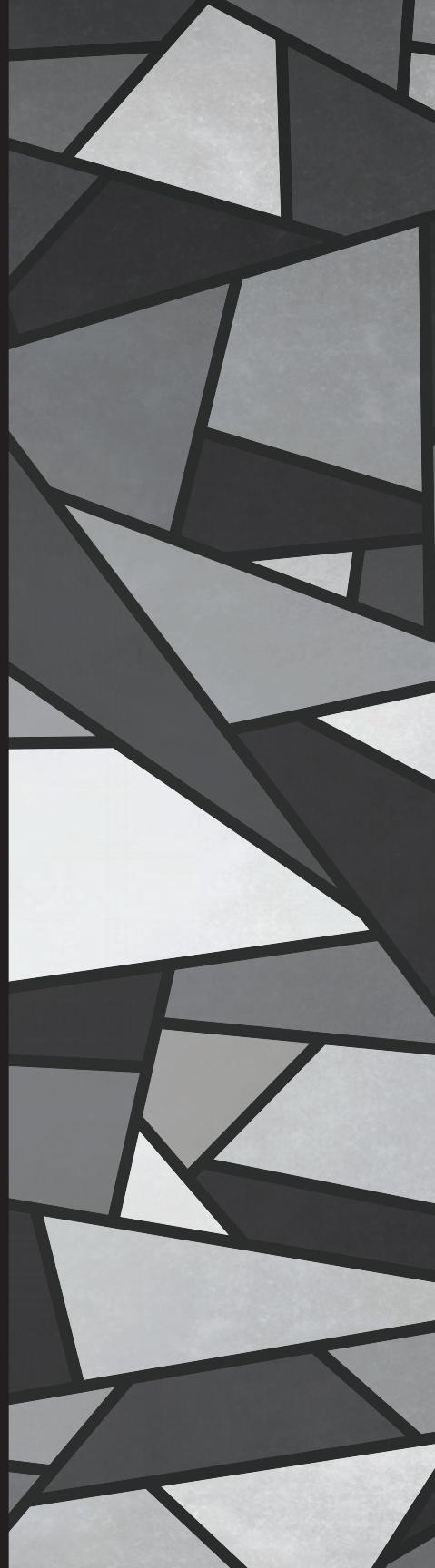
WEEK TWO

THE PURPOSE AND MISSION OF THE CHURCH

OUR CASE STUDY

Matthew 28:16-20

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. 17 And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. 18 And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”



- 1.** In the passage above, Jesus doesn't specifically mention the church. If Jesus is telling his followers to make disciples, why do we place so much emphasis on the church?

- 2.** What does it mean to be a disciple?

- 3.** Why should we be comforted to know that Jesus is with us always, even to the end of the age?

THE HISTORIC-UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Andrew Walls is a noted missionary, historian, and professor emeritus of Edinburgh University. In his classic work, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History*, Walls presents a thought-provoking scenario which has been adapted for this study.¹ Suppose that a traveler arrived with a time machine, and his purpose was to discover everything that he could learn about the church and the Christian faith. He first visits Jerusalem in 37 AD to meet the original group of Christians. He notes that they are all Jewish, carefully following the Jewish laws. What sets them apart is that they ascribe the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament) terms “Messiah” and “Son of Man” to Jesus of Nazareth, a rabbi-prophet who has recently died and whom they claim was raised from the dead.

Next, our visitor arrives in 325 AD at an ancient city in modern-day Turkey. He attends a great meeting of church leaders from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, gathered from across the Mediterranean world. They also use the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), but they give equal weight to another set of writings that did not exist in the time of the early church back in 37 AD (the New Testament). Their primary purpose for meeting is to understand the nature of Jesus as truly God and truly human. From there, our guest jumps ahead to visit London in the 1840s AD. People from several churches have gathered to discuss how they might carry the message of Jesus to people who live 4,000 miles away. They are discussing which individuals would be good candidates for the task, and how churches might financially support their work.

Finally, our friend joins us in Northern California in 2021 AD. He notices that while a large percentage of the population would say they are Christians, a far smaller percentage gather with other faithful Christians regularly, despite the fact that there seem to be churches everywhere. At the same time, the visitor observes that there are still a large number of churches who have continued to faithfully teach and apply the message of Jesus Christ—the gospel.

How is this possible? How can the church look so different from one era of history to the next, from one geographical region to another? From the days when Jesus commissioned the eleven apostles to make disciples of all nations until now, God has enabled the church to follow two important principles. First, the church is always a pilgrim. Throughout the centuries, the body of gathered believers has rightly understood that this world is not our home, but *“our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ”* (Phil. 3:20). Second, the church is always able to become indigenous—finding a way to belong in society—wherever it goes. When the church rightly understands these two principles, these two responsibilities, the church and the work of the gospel flourish.

¹Walls, Andrew F. The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of the Faith. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books. 2015.

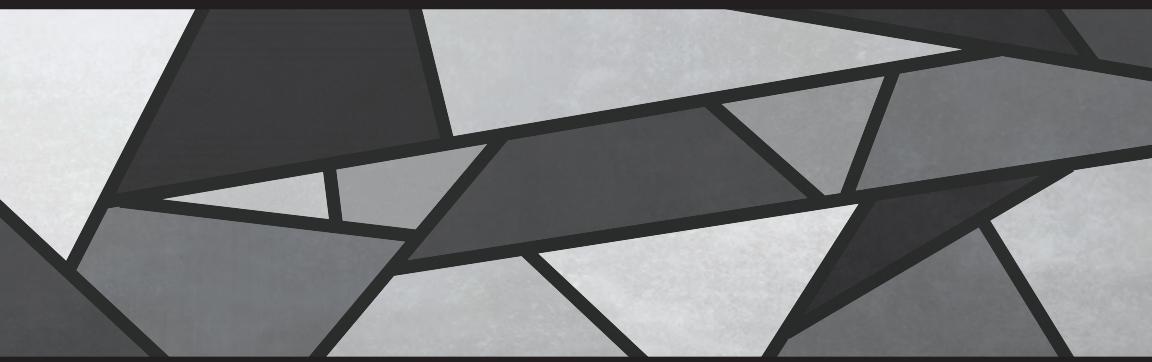
The church has continued to thrive for almost 2,000 years as pilgrims in this world while discovering ways to belong and be rooted in every society it has encountered. How has it done this? In His divine providence, how has God provided for the church in such a way that this is possible? The answer to this is found in our key passage today, **“go and make disciples.”**

If Jesus commanded us to make disciples, then why do we talk so much about the church? Do we actually need the church? These are good questions. The reality is that there is no better place for disciples to be formed than in the local church. If there were a better way of making disciples, we would do that. But there isn't any better way to make disciples than through the local church. The church grows, adapts, continues, and thrives as it makes disciples. A disciple is one who is a learner, being taught by a master. We make disciples when we teach others to observe everything that Jesus commanded us. That means that if we want to make disciples, we must first be a disciple.

How can we hope to teach others how to obey what the Lord has commanded us if we do not obey it ourselves?

Our purpose and mission is *to glorify God by making disciples who will impact every area of the world for Christ.* When we faithfully tell others the good news of Jesus (the gospel) and they surrender their life to Him, they begin the lifelong process of discipleship, just as we did when we repented of our sins and believed. Baptism in the name of the triune God is a means of marking or identifying those who are the disciples of Jesus. In our key passage, we are instructed to make disciples in (and of) all nations. In its original language, this translates to “all ethnicities.” We take the message of Jesus to as many places and peoples around the world as possible. We are confident that as people hear, repent, and trust in Jesus, the church will find a way to be rooted and belong in those cultures, and it will continue the centuries-old process of making disciples from one generation to the next.

This task that Jesus gave us—making disciples through the context of the local church in every area of the world for the glory of God—is not easy. To live with a pilgrim mentality that we are citizens of heaven with an everlasting prize that awaits us, namely Jesus our Savior, goes against our nature. We naturally want everything that we feel we deserve *now*. To find a way to belong in every culture and society is an equally difficult task. We don't want to learn how to communicate with and relate to people who aren't like us. So, what hope do we have that we can accomplish what Jesus has given us to do? Our hope is that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus, and He promised to be with us until the end of the age.

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“The reality is that there is no better place for disciples to be formed than in the local church.”

Review Questions

1. Why should the church live by the two principles of 1: being a pilgrim in this world, and 2: finding a way to belong in every culture?
2. What has kept the church growing and thriving throughout the centuries?
3. What are the currents that seem to flow against us as we try to make disciples?

THE MODERN-LOCAL CHURCH



Jesus instructed us to go and make disciples of all nations. The means for doing this are by identifying disciples through baptism and by teaching disciples to obey everything that Jesus commanded. Somewhere along the way, the modern church has replaced a robust theology of “all-in” belonging with a paradigm of irregular church attendance and participation in a few activities when it pleases us. Making disciples in every area of the world is too often outsourced in the modern church, something that “someone else” should do.

We glorify God when we commit to serious but joyful discipleship. We lift the name of Jesus high when we pay heed to learning everything that He commanded us to do, and when we can’t wait to teach others to do the same—following Jesus as a disciple is hard work. There is no easy path. But He, who has all authority, has promised that He will be with us. He has given us the blessing of the gathered church so that we might grow together as disciples as we learn from Him, and that we might make disciples in the next generation and in every part of the world.

Responding Questions

- 1. Personal Assessment:** The purpose and mission of our church is *to glorify God by making disciples who will impact every area of the world for Christ.* How does the pilgrim principle (that this world is not our home) and the indigenous principle (that the church has always found a way to belong in every culture and society) help us fulfill our purpose and mission?

What are some actual things that we can do to help us as we try to live that way?

2. Group Conversation & Reflection: At no point in the last 2,000 years has the disciple-making process failed in its mission. Jesus never had to push a “reset” button on the church. What do we need to do to ensure that the same can be said of us in this generation, in this place, in our culture?

How do we do that?

3. Action Steps: How can we begin to learn “everything that Jesus commanded” so that we might obey it and then teach others?

How do we get started on that?

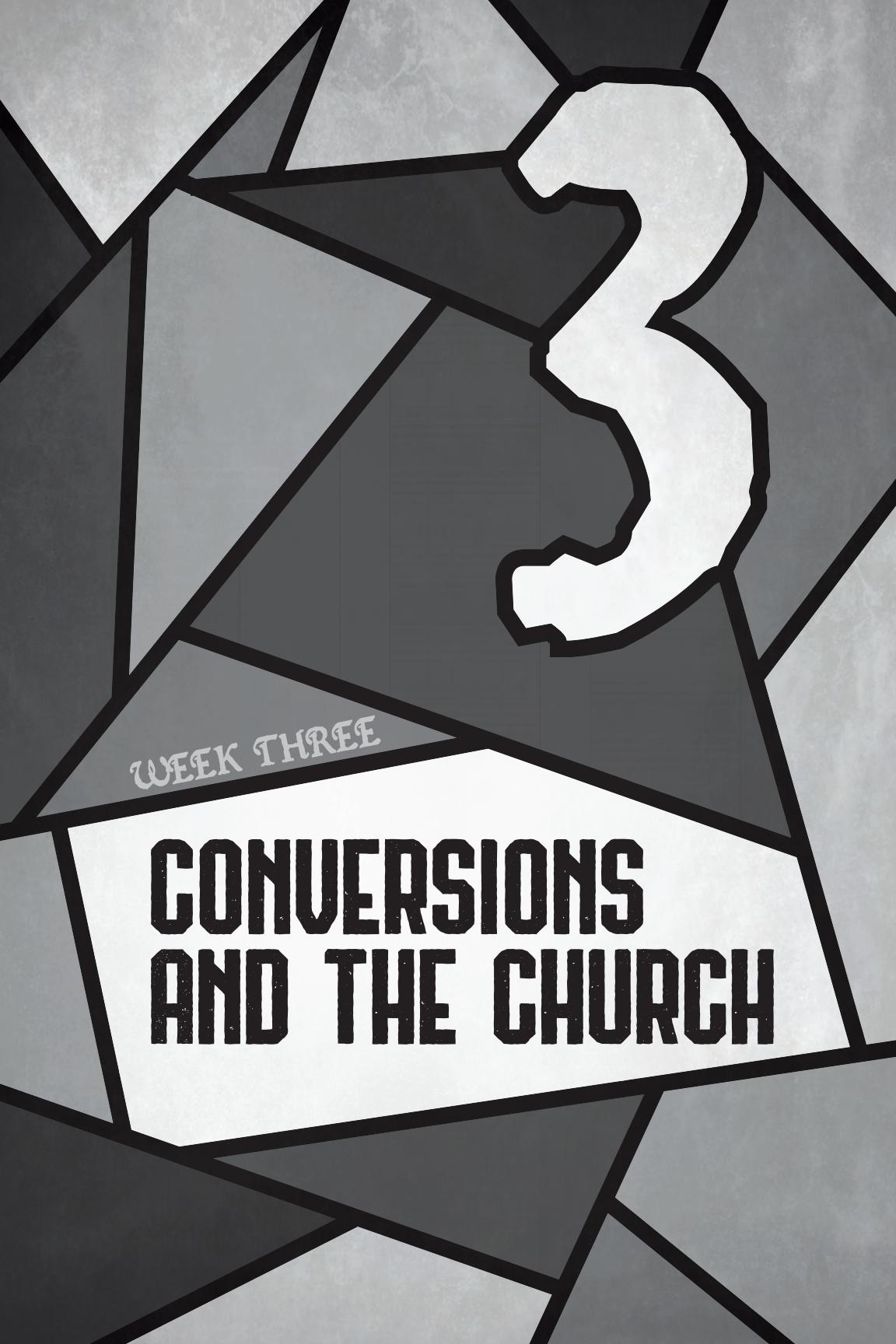
EXHORTATION

Let us be a church of disciples who make disciples in every part of the world by obeying what Jesus commanded us, identifying ourselves through baptism, and trusting in the unfailing promise that He will be with us to the end of the age, all for God's glory and our joy.



NOTES

The Purpose & Mission of the Church



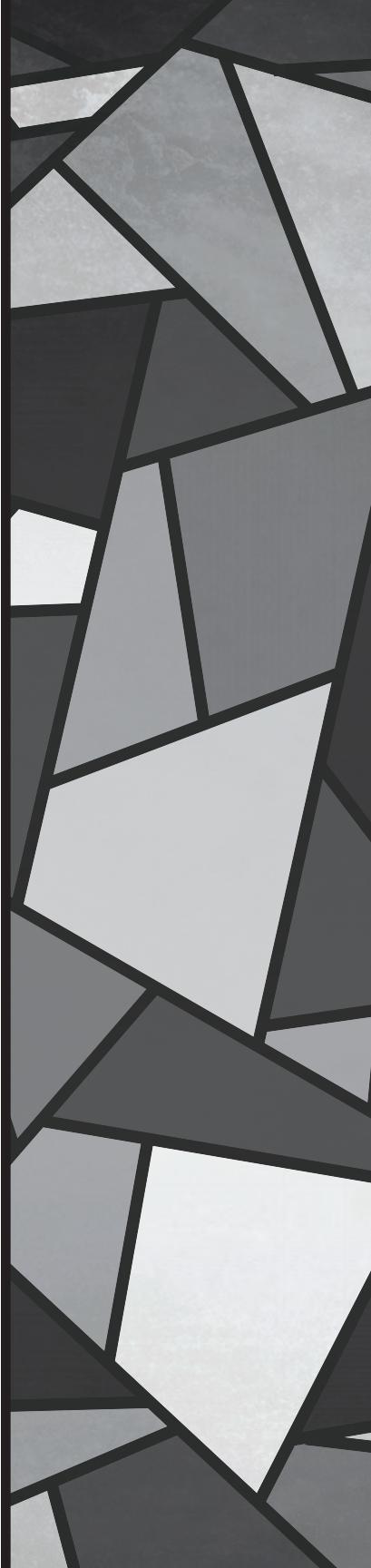
WEEK THREE

CONVERSIONS AND THE CHURCH

OUR CASE STUDY

Luke 14:25-33

Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, 26 “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. 27 Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. 28 For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? 29 Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, 30 saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ 31 Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? 32 And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. 33 So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.



1. Jesus gives three disqualifying actions for a disciple, what are they?

2. What practical examples does Jesus provide in this passage?

3. What should the disciple hate or renounce?

THE HISTORIC-UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Jesus pulls no punches when describing what it means to follow Him in this section of Luke. These words were probably difficult for the original hearers to take in, and they are equally difficult for us to read now.

What is a **disciple**, exactly? Through the Gospels, Jesus gives us clarity as to what He means and expects when calling someone a disciple. Simply put, a disciple is a believer who is following and learning to rightly reflect the image of Christ in and through their own life (**Gen. 1:27, Col. 3:10, 2 Cor. 3:18**). James K.A. Smith provides a helpful definition when he says, “Jesus’s command to follow him is a command to align our loves and longings with his—to want what God wants, to desire what God desires, to hunger and thirst after God and crave a world where he is all in all...”¹ This is the heart of Luke 14:25–33. Jesus wants all of our deepest desires to fall under the authority and love of Christ himself.

As we look a little closer to this passage, we might have noticed some strong language. Starting out in verse 26, Jesus says that if you do **“not hate your father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.”** Does Jesus really want His disciples to hate their families and themselves? No, not in a literal sense; remember God’s mandate to be fruitful and multiply (**Gen. 1:28**). Family is part of God’s created order, however, what Jesus is teaching about is about ordered loves. He is trying to get across the idea that there is no greater importance than

following after Him. He is ultimate. The relationship between the disciple and God is supreme above any other earthly relationship. The disciple's devotion to Christ is of utmost importance and significance.

Jesus then tells His hearers that they must be prepared to "***bear his own cross***" (Luke 14:27). These words would have been familiar to the disciples. In Luke 9:23–26, Jesus said,

"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself? For whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, of him will the Son of Man be ashamed when he comes in his glory and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels."

Jesus wanted His disciples to understand that they will have to be willing to give up what the world sees as gain. They will also have times of suffering as a result of being a gospel-following disciple. They needed to be prepared to bear this weight of following after Him. While suffering for Christ's sake may seem like something to be avoided, Peter described it differently when he wrote, "***But rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that***

¹ Smith, James K.A; "You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit", pg. 2 (2016, Brazos Press)

“Being a disciple of Jesus will come at a great cost, but it comes with the promise of an even greater blessing.”

you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you”(1 Pet. 4:13–14). Being a disciple of Jesus will come at a great cost, but it comes with the promise of an even greater blessing. Just in case the disciples didn’t understand Him (which happened frequently), Jesus included some practical illustrations: a builder and a king heading into war.

Both a builder and a king must be prepared for the work ahead. No good craftsman goes into a project without plans, costs, time estimates, conditions, etc. They must be fully aware of what they are getting into if they want to be successful. Likewise, a king heading into war must understand and grasp the full extent of the situation—no successful king jumps into war without carefully counting the cost. Will the loss be worth the reward? Jesus used these two examples to help the disciple understand that it is the same for them. They must be prepared. They must be willing to count the cost, understanding that, most emphatically, the loss will be worth the reward. Remember Paul’s words, **“In him we have obtained an inheritance,**



having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:11–14).

Similar to Jesus' words in Luke 14:26 to hate one's family compared to one's devotion to Himself, He broadened the scope by saying, “**any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple**” (Luke 14:33). To renounce means “to give up, refuse, or resign usually by formal declaration.”² Again, along with the other requirements that Jesus taught, this is the idea that there is an act of self-denial, a total devotion to Christ, nothing is to be worshiped above Him. “Thus the true self-denial which the Lord demands from His followers does not consist so much in outward conduct as in the affections; so that every one must employ the time which is passing over him without allowing the objects which he directs by his hand to hold a place in his heart.”³ Ultimately, the disciple's heart must solely and most devotedly belong to Christ above all else.⁴

²<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/renounce>

³ Calvin, John. “Commentary on Luke 14”. “Calvin’s Commentary on the Bible”. <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/eng/cal/luke-14.html>. 1840-57.

⁴ For a great resource on this topic, we would suggest the book *Above All: The Gospel Is the Source of the Church’s Renewal* by pastor J.D. Greear (2019, B&H Books)

Review Questions

1. Based on the text in this section, what is a disciple?
 2. Why does Jesus use the example of a builder and a king to help His hearers understand what a disciple is?
 3. Based on Luke 14, what does it mean to hate and renounce one's family?

THE MODERN-LOCAL CHURCH

In our current media-driven culture, the term “follower” has a specific context. Usually, it refers to following someone or an organization on social media. One “click” and you are now privy to anything and everything that particular social media account shares. If you get annoyed, feel uncomfortable, if that person or organization just doesn’t make you feel right, then you can “click” again and unfollow. The following of someone on social media is consumer-driven. As long as you are getting something you deem beneficial out of it, you will continue to follow.

A follower of Christ means something completely different, as we’ve seen from Jesus’ teaching in Luke 14. To follow Christ is not consumer-driven nor easily done. If you believe Paul’s words that *“He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then He appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles”* (1 Cor. 15:2-7), then you are a disciple. A long-term, faithful believer will be a long-term, faithful follower, learner, and teacher of who Jesus is. The fruit of your affection will be evident because Jesus will be above all.

“To follow Christ is not consumer-driven nor easily done.”



Responding Questions

- 1. Personal Assessment:** If you consider yourself to be a believer (Christian), in what ways do you see yourself as a disciple?

How have you been challenged by Jesus' words in Luke 14?

2. Group Conversation & Reflection: How does our current cultural understanding of being a follower (i.e., social media, etc.) perhaps shape being a follower of Christ (i.e., disciple)?

How can the church help make sure being a disciple is not consumer-driven?

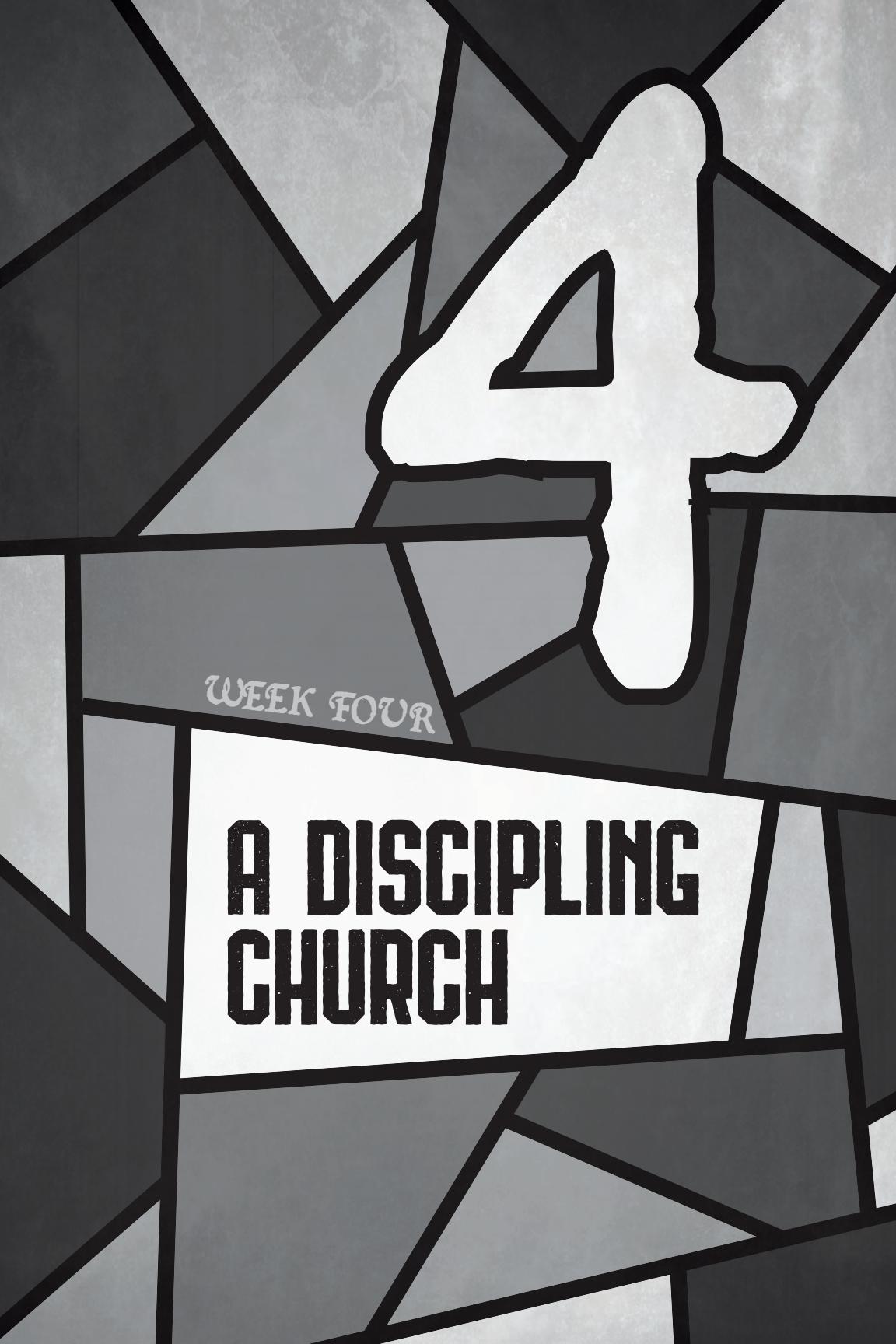
3. Action Steps: Being a disciple is not meant to be done alone or in isolation (as we'll read next week). What can you do to make sure you are correctly following after Christ and not making the things of this world above your affections for Christ?

EXHORTATION

Let us pray, with the help of the Holy Spirit, that we may keep our gaze fixed upon Jesus' face so when that Day comes, we would be found faithful followers of Christ, wholly devoted to Him in all things, to the glory of God.

NOTES

Conversions to the Church



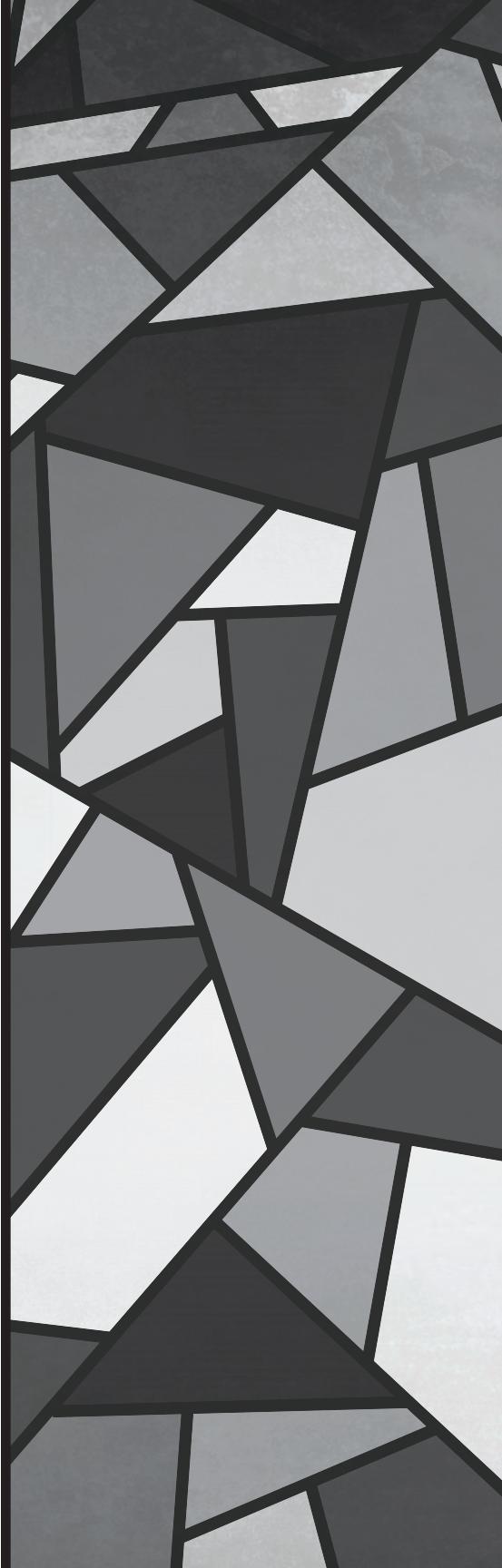
WEEK FOUR

A DISCIPLING CHURCH

OUR CASE STUDY

Acts 19:8-10

“And he entered the synagogue and for three months spoke boldly, reasoning and persuading them about the kingdom of God. 9 But when some became stubborn and continued in unbelief, speaking evil of the Way before the congregation, he withdrew from them and took the disciples with him, reasoning daily in the hall of Tyrannus. 10 This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks.”



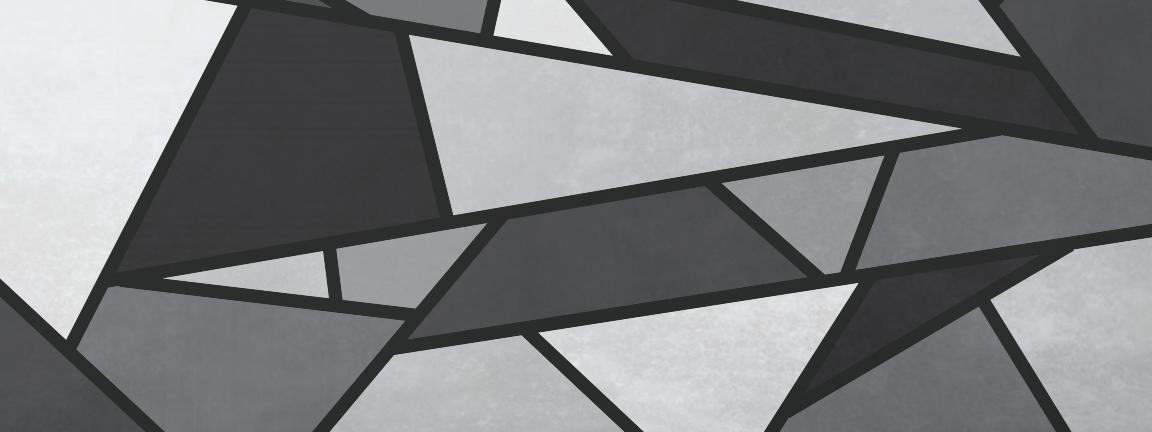
1. Paul entered the synagogue to preach the message of the gospel to the Jews in Ephesus. How much time does he spend sharing the gospel in this synagogue? Why do you suppose he took so long to speak the message of Christ?
 2. What were the two responses to Paul's message? Why do you think Paul eventually takes the disciples out of the synagogue in order to teach them?
 3. What are your initial thoughts after reading 19:10?

THE HISTORIC-UNIVERSAL CHURCH

A family sits together in a pew on a Sunday morning to sing praises to God, pray for the concerns of the church, and hear from the Word of God. A young mom invites a college student to her home to talk about relationships and marriage. A small group gathers for dinner and a Bible study. While a dad waits for his son to finish soccer practice, he shares with other parents what God has been teaching him. What do all of these scenarios have in common? In each of these cases, some form of discipleship is taking place.

Discipleship is not a one-size-fits-all formula, and there is no one way to accomplish evangelism. It can take place when brothers in Christ meet together at a coffee shop to study the Bible. Yet, at the same time, discipleship also happens whenever a pastor stands before hundreds of people to preach a sermon.

Acts 19:8–10 is one of many passages that illustrate what discipleship in the local church can look like. Here we see Paul make, encourage, and send disciples. He makes disciples by entering into the synagogue in Ephesus to preach the gospel. Notice that there are two reactions to Paul’s message: those who hate “*the Way*” and those who desire to grow in Christ. As a side note, we should mention that evangelism is an aspect of the discipleship process. Discipleship cannot happen unless disciples are made. Evangelism is the seed that initiates the growth process of following Christ—it’s the sharing of the good news of Jesus.



As we move forward into 10:9, we see hostility begin to break out in the synagogue. Those who hated Paul's message turned against those who decided to follow Christ. As a result, Paul decided to remove this new group of believers from the tumultuous environment by bringing them to the Hall of Tyrannus. For two full years, Paul encouraged these believers by instructing them in the fundamental teachings of Christianity.

The final verse of the passage ends with a staggering remark. Luke, the author of Acts, comments that the entire region of Asia "***heard the Word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks***"(19:10). During Paul's two-year-stint in Ephesus, the entirety of Asia (modern-day Turkey) heard the message of the gospel. It's a fair

assumption that Paul did not directly teach all of these people. It's more likely that he sent out the disciples from Ephesus throughout the region of Asia—because sending is part of the discipleship process.

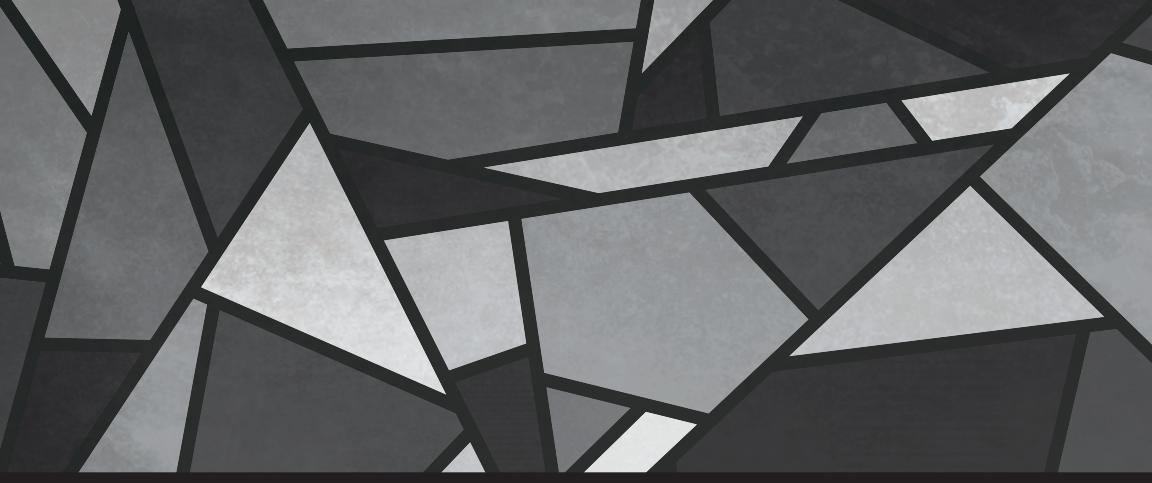
This passage implies three things. First, Paul makes disciples by preaching the gospel in the synagogue. Then, he encouraged the disciples by instructing them in the faith. Finally, Paul sent the disciples to make more disciples. This is a pattern we also see outside of Acts. For instance, when Paul wrote to the young pastor named Timothy, he encouraged him, "***You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to***

teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:1–2). Paul encouraged Timothy to utilize the same strategy used in Ephesus. In other words, Paul is trying to make disciples who will then make disciples who will then make disciples. The call for Christian discipleship is one of steady replication.

This leads to an important question. What should disciples be equipped with? Is there a specific program that must be offered for discipleship to take place? It’s important to see that the New Testament does not offer a one-size-fits-all model for discipleship. Think back to the example we have from the apostle Paul. Paul’s method of discipling in the Hall of Tyrannus primarily focused on the intellect. As the passage says, Paul was “***reasoning daily***” with the disciples. He was teaching them the truths of Scripture. But this does not mean that discipleship only refers to Bible studies. While discipling often includes Bible studies, it is not limited to that.

For example, 2 Thessalonians 3 offers all sorts of ways for the church to live godly lives while waiting for the return of Jesus. We are encouraged to “***keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness***” (3:6). Similarly, we ought to imitate Paul’s example by paying for our food, laboring in our work, and avoiding busybody tendencies (3:8, 11). In 3:10, Paul goes on to say, “***If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat.***” As Christians, we are called to persist “***in doing good***” (3:13).

All of this to say, the method and mode of discipleship in any given relationship can adapt to an individual’s needs. Sometimes biblical knowledge should be imparted. At other times, there will be an emphasis on imparting biblical wisdom. The important thing is that after disciples are made, they are appropriately equipped so that they can be sent.



“Discipleship cannot happen unless disciples are made. Evangelism is the seed that initiates the growth process of following Christ—it’s the sharing of the good news of Jesus.”

Review Questions

1. What three components of discipleship were highlighted in this section?
2. How does evangelism relate to discipleship?
3. What are the different ways an individual can be equipped through a discipleship relationship?

THE MODERN-LOCAL CHURCH



Paul's example demonstrates that the discipleship process will depend on the needs of the individuals. For effective discipleship to happen, an evaluation must take place. Does this person need to grow in his or her knowledge? Maybe a theology class or a Bible study will be most suitable. On the other hand, maybe a young mom needs help scheduling out her day in a way that will benefit her kids, her husband, and herself. While we would not advocate that a Bible study couldn't help this young mom, some other approaches would prove beneficial.

The New Testament portrait of Christian discipleship demonstrates that Christians are to help other Christians submit to the Lordship of Christ in all aspects of life. There is no element of life that is free to roam outside of the jurisdiction of Christ's dominion. He is the Lord of all creation. Thus, disciples should encourage one another to live in complete submission to Jesus' rule.



Responding Questions

1. **Personal Assessment:** How are you personally growing as a disciple of Christ right now?

In what ways are you being equipped?

Where are you being sent?

2. Group Conversation & Reflection: How have you typically understood the concept of discipleship?

Has this chapter challenged your own personal thinking about the topic?
If so, how?

3. Action Steps: By its very nature, Christian discipleship is meant to be replicated. In what ways are you striving to help others grow in Christ?

Are there ways in which you can be more intentional to disciple others? If so, explain?

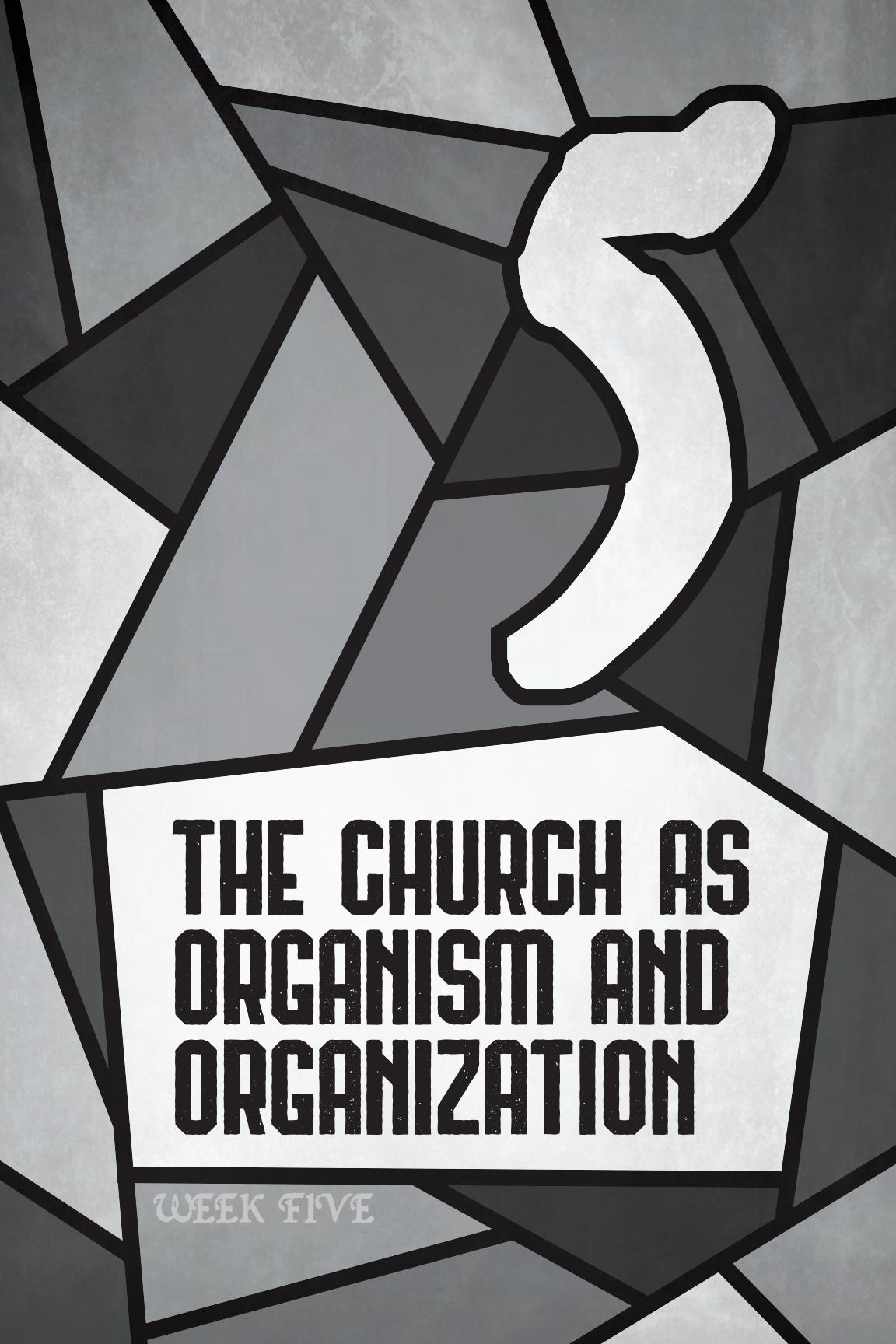
EXHORTATION

The health of the local church is dependent on the maturity of the individual Christians who make up the membership of the local church. This means that discipleship is an intricate element of the local church. So, be discipled and seek to disciple others. Don't wait to be approached. Take the initiative to serve the church by growing and helping others to grow. The health and vitality of the church depend on it.



NOTES

A Discipling Church



THE CHURCH AS ORGANISM AND ORGANIZATION

WEEK FIVE

OUR CASE STUDY

1 Peter 2:4-5

As you come to Him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.



1. Who is the one Peter refers to as “Him”?
 2. What words imply a living and active organism?
 3. Which phrases indicate that the church is an organized entity?

THE HISTORIC-UNIVERSAL CHURCH

In the New Testament, Peter explains that the completion of the Old Testament temple is now present in the living temple of Christ's church. There are two aspects to this newly completed temple. Just like the living human body has an order and form of its various members, so the living body of the church has its organic and organizational nature. Let us consider the church both as an organism and as an organization.

First, as an *organism*, the church is clearly defined and understood as a living entity. She is made up of living stones, is given a multifaceted giftedness, provides an active witness in the world, and is a unified body. This organism and her members have an individual and collective relationship with the One who is her head and to whom she continually comes—the living cornerstone—Christ Jesus. The organic nature of the church is her life, emotion, heart, and soul. She is a living being.

One expression of the church as an organism is found in her giftedness. The Scripture tells us that the Spirit gives gifts to each and every member, *“To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good”* (1 Cor. 12:7). According to 1 Peter 4:11, these gifts distill into two fundamental categories of *serving* and *speaking*. The exercise of these gifts displays the organic and dynamic nature of the church.



A second expression of the organic nature of Christ's church is her *witness* to the world. This witness can take place both in the church gathered and in the world outside the church. For example, Paul envisions outsiders being present in the church gathering where they see and hear the things of God (**1 Cor.14:23**). It is a living witness to living people. This in-house witness is organic in nature. Acts 2:46-47 is a picture of the church's witness to those who are not necessarily in the church gatherings. The unity, love, and fellowship of the church, combined with her goodwill to the people in the world, became the context for others being saved and added to their number. This, too, is a reality of the living nature of Christ's body.

It is important to see the church as an organism in order to avoid rote activity and routine living in our worship, service, edification, and witness to the world. Truly, it is only a living body that can, as the answer to the first question in the Westminster Shorter Catechism says, "glorify God and enjoy Him forever."¹

The second aspect of the church is its *organization*. The New Testament Greek word for church is *ekklesia* which is defined as an organized gathering and assembly. 1 Corinthians 14:23 reveals one way that the church is an organized and identifiable entity—there are those who are a part of this organization and those

¹Great Commission Publications. *Trinity Hymnal*. Philadelphia: Great Commission Publications, 1961, p. 666.

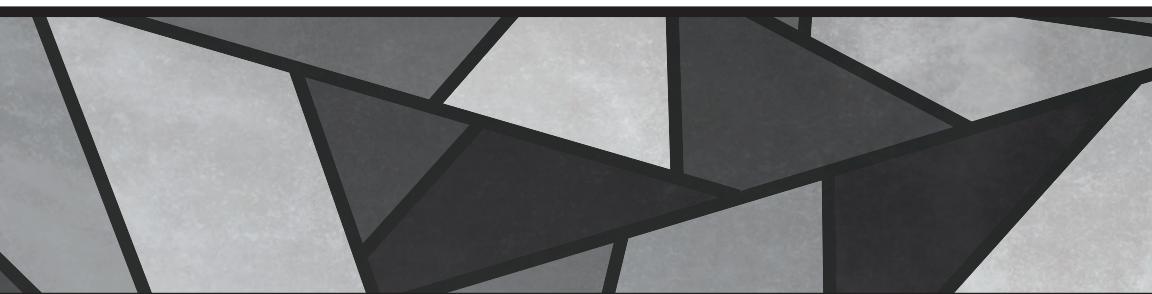
who are not. Here, Paul says that the whole church comes together and may be joined by outsiders and unbelievers. The London Baptist Confession of 1689 speaks further to this organizational aspect of the church when it says “a particular church gathered, and completely organized, according to the mind of Jesus Christ, consists of officers and members.”² According to Philippians 1:1, these officers are elders and deacons (which we will learn more about next week).

J. L. Dagg writes that “a local church is an assembly of believers organized for the worship and service of God.”³ This observation reflects Peter’s statement concerning the living stones of the church. The stones are structured and ordered to form a holy priesthood who will offer spiritual sacrifices in this temple. The church has been organized to fulfill her priestly function. The Reformers sought to clarify this doctrine of the New Testament church. Martin Luther and John Calvin each labored to show that believers are given their acceptable standing before

God solely through faith in Christ. Any mediation of earthly priests was a corruption of Christ’s unique work and role.

This **priesthood of all believers** involves privilege. Ephesians 3:12 tells us we have “**boldness and access with confidence.**” Furthermore, this privilege leads to responsibility as stated in Isaiah 61:6, “**you shall be called the priests of the Lord.**” The priestly responsibility of the church is to offer spiritual sacrifice and service to God. This spiritual service of sacrifice in the church is to be carried out through the organizational schema of officers and members. Church officers provide the environment in which members cooperatively function in service and sacrifice to the Lord. There is a synergistic relationship between officers and members that cannot be separated. The priesthood of all believers implies the service and function of the many members must not be impeded. Additionally, this doctrine implies that the functional role of authorized church leaders must not be negated.

“The combination of these two aspects provide the context for the peace, unity, and usefulness of the church.”



In the living and growing dynamic of Christ’s church, the organizational role of the officers is needed for equipping the saints (**Eph. 4:12**), for guidance by precept and pattern (**1 Pet. 5:3**), and for coordination of body life (**1 Tim. 3:4, 5**). The members live, serve, and work within this organic and organizational framework of the church. A biblical church is both an organism and an organization. The combination of these two aspects provide the context for the peace, unity, and usefulness of the church.

² Great Commission Publications. *Trinity Hymnal: Baptist Edition*. Suwanee: Great Commission Publications, 1995, p. 684.

³ Dagg, J.L, *Manual of Theology and Church Order*. Harrisonburg: Gano Books, 1982, p. 129.

Review Questions

1. What are the two aspects of the church's nature?
2. What are two ways that the church expresses her organic nature?
3. Why does the church need the organizational role of officers?

THE MODERN-LOCAL CHURCH

In a biblical church, the organic and organizational aspects will work in harmony with one another. Members and leaders will prayerfully and graciously keep them both in focus as they worship, lead, teach, plan, and serve one another. Holding these two dimensions of church life in proper proportion is important. Phyllis Kline clarifies this when she writes:

Organization must be seen as a means or a tool to facilitate or enhance life, not stifle it. Tenaciously hold to relationship over programming. Focus on functioning as a Body over established forms or structures. When you do that, you will still have programs and will continue to establish forms or structures to accomplish what you have to do but that will not be your top priority. Rather it will lead to a greater good.⁴

The biblically functioning church as an organism and organization will exhibit mutual respect, recognition, honor, and love of the officers and members alike. We must see ourselves as an interdependent organism not merely as individuals who go to the same church. This will be accomplished when we see officer-member relationships as complementary positions working alongside one another and not in competition with each other. We are a part of one another. We are one body. We are the living stones. We are a spiritual house. We are a holy priesthood offering spiritual sacrifices.

⁴ Kline, Phyllis. "Organization Needed in the Church But For What Purpose?" 2012. <https://mintools.com/blog/organization-purpose.htm>

Responding Questions

- 1. Personal Assessment:** Has your thinking been changed by this teaching on the church as an organism and an organization? If so, how?

2. Group Conversation & Reflection: What dangers or excesses might arise if the organic and organizational nature of the church are not kept in proper proportion?

Why is this important?

3. Action Steps: What is at least one thing you can do that will contribute to and enhance the organic and organizational nature of the church?

EXHORTATION

Through mutual
recognition and respect,
let us grow in our
relationships in this
spiritual, organic
organization that we
call Golden Hills
Community Church.

A horizontal line consisting of a thick black brushstroke with a slightly irregular, hand-drawn appearance.

NOTES

The Church as Organism & Organization



WEEK SIX

LEADERS OF THE CHURCH

OUR CASE STUDY

I Timothy 3:1-13

The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. 2 Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. 4 He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, 5 for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? 6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. 7 Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.

8 Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. 9 They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. 11 Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. 12 Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. 13 For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.



1. What are the similarities between the qualifications for Elders and Deacons?
 2. What are the differences between the two groups?
 3. How would you describe the type of character of someone who holds to the office of Elder or Deacon?

THE HISTORIC-UNIVERSAL CHURCH

Pastors

As the followers of Jesus expanded into larger communities, we almost instantly began to see the formal formation of church bodies—not merely undefined social groups, but congregations that had clearly established leaders who formally led them. These leaders are defined in two different sorts of groups: *pastors* and *deacons*.

First, we have **pastors**: men who were tasked to oversee local congregations. In the book of Acts (which tells the early story of how the church formed), we see in chapter 11 how the church in Antioch took up a collection to send to the Christians in Judea. They didn't purposely send a bunch of money to random Christians in Judea. Rather, the leaders of the Antioch church sent the money to the leaders of the church in Judea. There was an established leadership who would oversee and be responsible for the funds (**Acts 11:30**). This sort of defined leadership is seen throughout the book of Acts (and other New Testament books), as a clear example of established leaders in local congregations.

The New Testament uses three different Greek words to describe the office of pastor: *presbuteros*, *episkopos*, and *poimaino*. While these are three different words, they are used synonymously to describe the same position—the pastor. Paul actually used all three of these words in Acts 20 to address a group of pastors in Ephesus. Paul sought to speak to the elders (*presbuteros*) in 20:17, and then referred to them as overseers (*episkopos*) and shepherds (*poimaino*) in 20:28, yet it was the same group of leaders.

Paul was one of the early leaders responsible for establishing local churches (e.g., **Acts 14:23**). One of the men Paul had discipled was young Timothy, the same Timothy that he later wrote letters to. In 1 Timothy 3, Paul laid out some of the clear expectations for a pastor (a paralleled passage can be found in Titus 1). In this section, Paul used the term *episkopos* (overseer) to describe the role of a pastor in a local congregation. Paul listed two basic categories for qualifications: character and skill sets.

From an integrity standpoint, the pastor ought to be a man who is above reproach in his character. He is faithful to his wife, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, is not given to drunkenness, etc. Another way of stating this is that he

is above reproach—he is blameless. To be blameless doesn't mean to be morally perfect or without sin (as no one would meet that requirement), but the point is that church leaders ought to have a good reputation among Christians and non-Christians alike. Aside from these virtuous character traits, pastors also have the specific role of instructing the congregation and protecting against false doctrine, ensuring that sound doctrine is taught.

Because formal leadership is clearly taught in the New Testament, it's implicitly clear that formal leaders must have specific people whom they oversee. Therefore, the local church is made up of leaders and congregants, or more specifically, pastors and members (we will discuss this more next week).¹

¹Some other biblical passages that discuss church eldership are: Acts 15:1–35; 20:17–38;

1 Tim. 5:17–25; Titus 1:5–9; Heb. 13:7–16; 1 Pet. 5:1–5.

“To be blameless doesn’t mean to be morally perfect or without sin (as no one would meet that requirement), but the point is that church leaders ought to have a good reputation among Christians and non-Christians alike.”

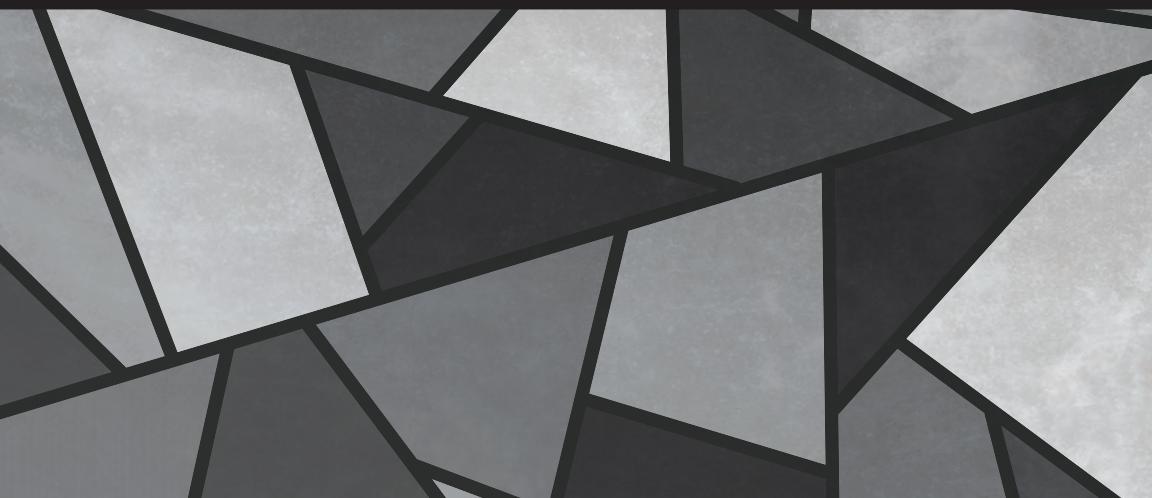
Deacons

The second official “office” of the local church is that of **deacon**. The term deacon comes from the Greek word *diakonos*, and has a basic meaning of “servant” (like a waiter who serves food). While all Christians are called to be servants (just as Jesus “**came to serve, not to be served,**” **Mark 10:45**), the early church had established the deacon as an official office of leadership. The character requirements for deacons are similar (although not identical) to elders. They, too, are to be people of high character that are deemed trustworthy and of good reputation (both inside and outside the church). However, the role that the deacon assumes is very different from that of an elder. While elders teach and oversee the congregation, the deacon functions as official servant, with no teaching or ruling responsibilities. The deacon is responsible for serving the members of the church, especially the most needy.

In the first-century, it was seen as shameful to be a servant, as people in Jewish and Roman cultures did anything they could to avoid shame and instead sought honor. However, following the example of Jesus—who is the true and ultimate servant—the early church made serving a virtue of the highest level. The deacon (literally meaning a *server*) was established as a foundational leadership office, specifically in order to help the practical, material, and spiritual needs of widows, and other people who are lacking.

Throughout the history of the church, it has long been established and practiced that all Christians serve. However, different roles dictate how they serve. The elder/pastor/shepherd has been granted the authority to lead in a way that provides spiritual authority over a congregation. Yet, they lead as a Christ-like disciple, which means they are also a servant. The deacon doesn't assert authority over a congregation but instead demonstrates their position in how they serve.

When we look at the two offices of leadership within a local church, we should see a good model for the congregation of elders who are servant leaders, and deacons who are leading servants!



Review Questions

1. What is the difference between elders (*presbuteros*), overseers (*episkopos*), and shepherds (*poimaino*)?
 2. What is the primary function of the pastor?
 3. What is the primary function of the deacon?

THE MODERN-LOCAL CHURCH

While these are very important offices, we need to remember that elders and deacons aren't moral "super-Christians." From a character standpoint, everything that is asked of them is asked of all of God's people. Just compare some of the character traits of 1 Timothy 3 with other biblical teachings that apply to any spirit-filled believer: *self-control* (Gal. 5:22), *hospitality* (1 Pet. 4:9; Lev. 19:34), *not a drunkard* (Eph. 5:18; Rom. 13:13), *gentleness* (Rom. 12:19), *not quarrelsome* (2 Tim. 2:24), *not a lover of money* (Luke 16:14). All Christians are called to live virtuous lives—to be holy—because God is holy (1 Pet. 1:16)!

We are also all called to serve others, even if we aren't called to serve in the formal "office" of deacon. This is because the heart of being a Jesus follower is mimicking His example of service and sacrifice. Paul talks about this in Philippians 2:1–11, where he shares the example of Jesus giving up His eternal position of glory with God in order to step into His own creation and redeem it by becoming a servant.

Jesus was both the true and ultimate leader, as well as the true and ultimate servant. And so, we shouldn't ever fall into the temptation of making other people the standard of goodness (whether a pastor or other people we admire). Let us always look to Christ and attempt to follow Him and how He served, being above reproach in how we love our fellow church members, just as Jesus loved the church.



Responding Questions

1. Personal Assessment: Do you love the church? Meaning, do you love your local congregation (the people)?

How do you function as a servant within your local congregation?

While most of us don't fulfill the role of pastor/deacon at GHCC, how are we involved in service?

- 2. Group Conversation & Reflection:** Read through Romans 12 and note how Paul instructs Christians to behave (both what they are supposed to do, and what they are supposed to avoid). How does this list connect with the qualifications for elders and deacons?

- 3. Action Steps:** All of God's people are to be above reproach, but there are certain people who are called into leadership positions. Are there people you know who are called into church leadership positions but might need some encouragement to pursue such a commitment?

EXHORTATION

Let us imitate Jesus: the true elder—the perfect shepherd—who is the perfect model of self-control, gentleness, and humility. The perfect deacon who came to serve, not to be served. Father, allow our congregation to model Him to the world.



NOTES

Leaders of the Church

WEEK SEVEN

COVENANT CHURCH MEMBERSHIP

OUR CASE STUDY

Hebrews 10:23-25

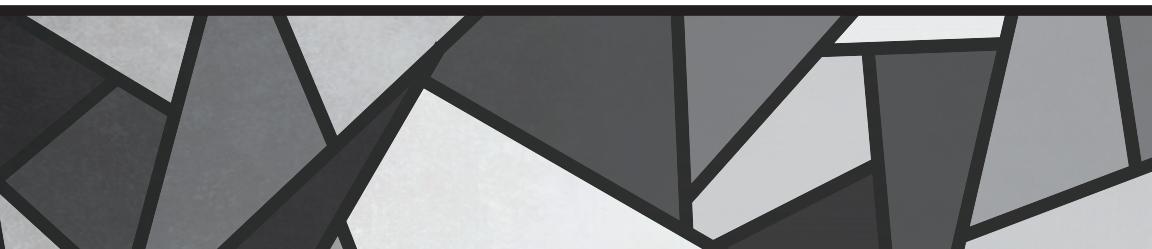
Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

Hebrews 13:17

Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

1 John 4:7, 11, 19-21

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love... Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.



1. What connection is there between meeting together and Christ's return in Hebrews 10?
 2. What does Hebrews 13:17 connect the church's obedience to their leaders? Why?
 3. What connection does John make between God's love for us and our love for our brothers and sisters in the church?

THE HISTORIC-UNIVERSAL CHURCH

What do you think of when you hear the word *membership*? Many of us are card-carrying members of a food warehouse, such as Costco or Sam's Club. We pay our yearly dues, and in exchange, we delight in many benefits, from food court fare to a "no questions asked" return policy to discounts on jumbo-sized jars of mayonnaise. So, when we hear the word membership, that may be what comes to mind, a relation based on who or what will give us the most benefits. But the membership we see displayed in the New Testament works very differently than the dues-benefits style agreement that comes to mind when we hear someone mention membership.

While the concept of church membership is evident throughout the New Testament, it is not explicitly taught. There is no passage that we can point to that says, "Thou shalt become a member of your local church." Instead, we have the opportunity to be students of the entirety of the New Testament. We can learn a lot from looking closely at what the early church was doing and the instructions that were given to church members through the apostles. Throughout the book of Acts, we see the early church quickly implementing the administrative processes we use today. We see church leaders keeping records of growing churches (**Acts 2:41**), we see the church developing methods to care for each other's needs (**Acts 6:1-2**), and we see them financially supporting their members who go out to spread the gospel as missionaries (**Acts 13:1-3**).

“The church is not something that stands alone; it can’t.”

As we continue to dig deeper, we begin to understand more about our relationship to our community of believers through the many different illustrations the New Testament authors use. We, as the church and its members, are referred to as a *body* (**Eph. 4:4–7**), a *household* (**1 Tim. 3:15**), a *spiritual house* (**1 Pet. 2:5**), and a *flock* (**1 Pet. 2:25, 5:2**). All these images point to the fact that what makes the local church a church is its members. Just as you cannot have a flock without sheep, you cannot have a body without parts, and you cannot have a church without church members. The church is not something that stands alone; it can’t. For it is the sum of its parts, it is a group of committed believers who regularly gather in Christ’s name to affirm and oversee each other’s discipleship in Jesus Christ and membership in His kingdom through gospel preaching, gospel ordinances, and gospel discipline.¹ It is a focused, devoted, and committed family of believers.

Choosing to enter a covenant relationship with our local church is crucial to the health of the Christian. It is an act of us proclaiming our glorious salvation through our alignment with God’s people and through submitting to the leadership that God has established. We show our universal church membership to the **invisible church** through the experience of having circumcised hearts and spiritual regeneration, and we demonstrate our membership to the **visible church** through baptism and covenant church membership.

¹Golden Hills Community Church Membership class curriculum, week two

Through our covenant church membership, we formally step into a relationship with our local, fellow believers, agreeing to mutual Bible-based accountability and responsibility. Through our commitment to each other, God uses our diversity to sanctify us. He uses every occasion when we meet together, study God's word together, pray together, confess our sin, and forgive each other. By deciding to be together even when the only thing we have in common is our Savior, we show to the world that we value reconciliation and unity more than our comfort or preferences, even when it exposes our sin and failings. Knowing this would not be easy, the writer of Hebrews implores us to have loving care for our fellow members. He reminds us to *"consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together..." (Heb. 10:24)*.

“Through our commitment to each other, God uses our diversity to sanctify us.”

We are to give careful, intentional thought on how to spur each other on. Behaving this way requires prayer and love for our fellow members based on a Spirit-led desire to see them glorify God with their lives. We cannot do this independent of the Holy Spirit, and we cannot have that type of commitment to each other while neglecting to meet. It's far too easy to let our hearts grow hardened with space and time. Seeing our brothers and sisters face to face, hearing their struggles and faith, softens our hearts while spurring us on to love and good works. Meeting together as a church is a beautiful act of hope-filled anticipation, anticipation for the final gathering of God's people in eternity. Our "assembly is the earthly counterpoint to the heavenly 'congregation' of God's people."²

Covenant Church Membership

When we are covenant church members, we are also choosing to submit to each other. Submission can be a word that causes us to bristle, and we may immediately want to push back against it. Living in a time where culturally, the idea of submitting to anyone seems oppressive and wrong, submitting ourselves to the church and its leaders can seem absurd. Submission is defined as “the state of being obedient: the act of accepting the authority or control of someone else.”³ And that’s precisely what we see in Scripture—that Jesus, though He was God, emptied Himself in obedience to the Father (**Phil. 2:5–9**). He chose to. He submitted Himself, His desires, and His preferences in obedience—even obedience to the point of death on the cross. Submitting to the church also means submitting to the leaders God has established in our local, visible congregation.

We are told clearly in Hebrews 13:17 that our pastors and elders are **“those who will have to give an account”** to God for our discipleship. As our leaders remain faithful to the gospel, we submit to them as they watch over our souls, and the result is joy for them as they carry the weight of accountability. But when we, as believers, turn away from that careful watch over our souls, it grieves our leaders, effectively stealing their joy. Our submission to their leadership, their teaching, and their guidance are one of the ways we submit to God. It feels uncomfortable, it feels unnatural, it can even feel vulnerable. This is why we need the mutual accountability that a covenant membership provides to ensure we choose our leaders wisely and carefully, committing to pray for them regularly and serve them faithfully. As we are reminded throughout Scripture, we are strangers, aliens, foreigners in this world. But in the local church, when we gather, we are a family of adopted sons and daughters of the Most High God.

² O’Brian, Peter T. *The Letter to the Hebrews*. PNTC. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010.

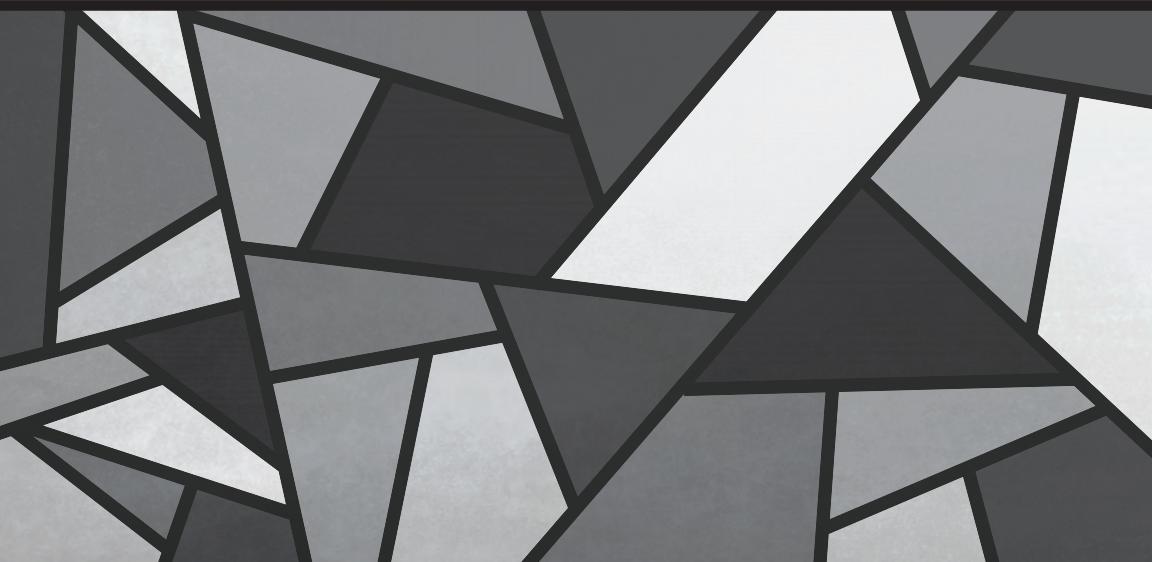
³ “Submission.” Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/submission>.

Review Questions

1. What are the illustrations that the New Testament uses to communicate how the church works?
2. What makes the local church the church of God?
3. How is our submission a reflection of Jesus?



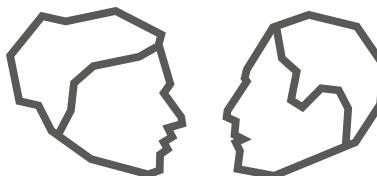
“As we are reminded throughout Scripture, we are strangers, aliens, foreigners in this world. But in the local church, when we gather, we are a family of adopted sons and daughters of the Most High God.”



THE MODERN-LOCAL CHURCH

One of the most beautiful things about covenant church membership is the way it answers the questions our culture is asking. There are countless movies, books, and works of art around us asking the question “Who am I?” or “What is my purpose?” or “Do I belong?” Maybe these are questions you ask yourself. But God, in His infinite wisdom and kindness, has given us more than just the answer to these questions. Through our church, He has given us a people to work out our salvation with.

By covenanting with a church, we are given the opportunity to live out what it means to be a child of God, to be adopted into His family—to practically live out what it means to be the people He has gathered to Himself. We are given the privilege of obeying God when He commands us to love one another like He has loved us. We are asked through serving the church to let go of our love of money, power, or comfort to instead care for each other’s needs. It is through this covenant relationship with each other that we show the community around us what it looks like when people who seem to have nothing in common choose unity and love over comfort.



We are servants of a God who delights in reconciliation and restoration. Within the church there will be sin, struggle, miscommunication, misunderstanding, and hurt. And while we look ahead to eternity where we will commune with each other in the presence of God's righteousness, we currently live in a fallen and broken reality. As a committed group of believers, we are to pursue love in the form of serving one another, pray for one another, disciple one another, live at peace with one another, are kind to one another, encourage one another, and build each other up in the Word of God. When we do this, we are proclaiming the goodness of God to the world, and we give them, and ourselves, a glimpse of eternity.

**“We are servants of a God
who delights in reconciliation
and restoration.”**

Responding Questions

- 1. Personal Assessment:** Are you a covenant member of your local church? If not, what has stopped you from making that commitment?

If you are, how is your commitment to your fellow members' discipleship being fleshed out in the church?

2. Group Conversation & Reflection: What do you think of when you hear the term church membership?

In what ways is that in and out of alignment with the New Testament's imagery of a flock, a body, and a household?

3. Action Steps: If you have not taken yet, enroll in the membership classes. Even if you are already a member and haven't taken the updated class yet, or are not sure you are ready to be in a covenant relationship yet, it can only bring good in your walk with God to understand the people you worship with on Sundays more. And if you are a member, it may be time for you to see guidance on how you can better partner with your brothers and sisters through Christ in their discipleship.

EXHORTATION

Church, let us join in praise for our Father in heaven and the gift He has given us through church membership. That in His love for us, He has designed a community that will watch over our lives as we watch over theirs. That in His wisdom, He gave us a covenant community that will challenge and encourage us so that we may be conformed more and more to the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. Let's thank Him for giving us this opportunity to worship Him together, looking ahead to the day when we will stand with the invisible church and singing our "Hallelujah!"



NOTES

Covenant Church Membership

8

WEEK EIGHT

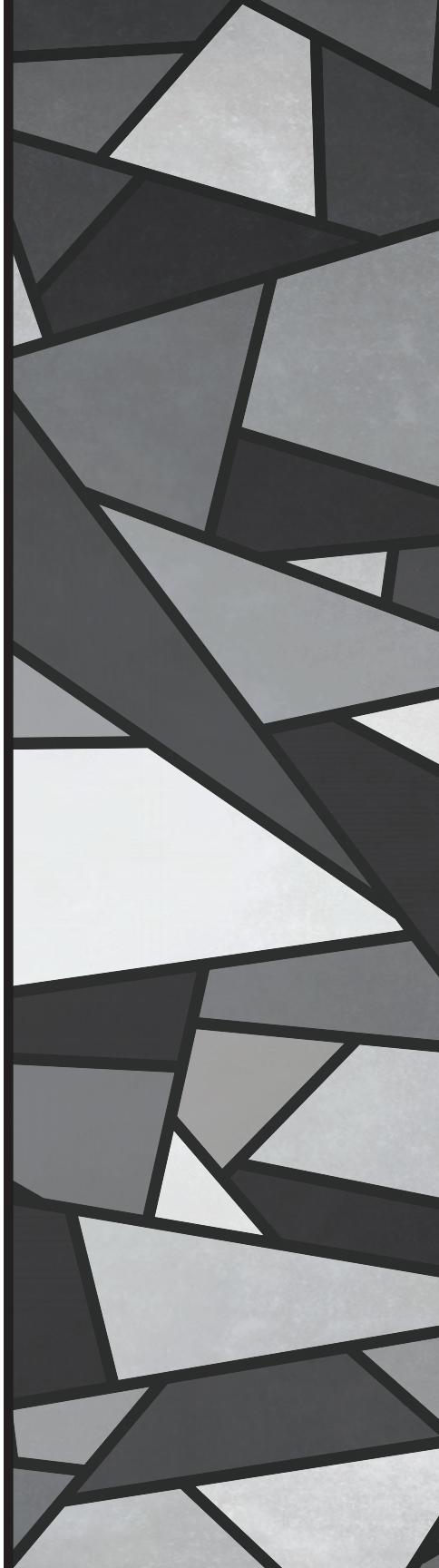
THE BAPTIZING CHURCH

OUR CASE STUDY

Romans 4:7-12

“Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; 8 blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin.”

9 Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. 10 How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. 11 He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, 12 and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.



1. In Romans 4, what is the order of Abraham's righteousness and being circumcised? Which came first?
 2. Based on this passage, if we were to equate righteousness to faith and circumcision to baptism, how might this inform us as to when someone should get baptized?
 3. Based on your own knowledge of the Old Testament, what was the significance of circumcision, and what does it eventually come to represent in the New Testament?

THE HISTORIC-UNIVERSAL CHURCH

In the Old Testament, God made a **covenant** with Abraham (**Genesis chapters 12; 15; 17**), promising a future restoration and kingdom for the descendants of Abraham who followed Yahweh. The sign of this covenant was given in Genesis 17:9–14, where God commanded Abraham to **circumcise** all males who were part of this covenant community. Through the rest of the Old Testament story, circumcision was the sign that marked off those who belonged to God. However, as the prophets continued to communicate how God was acting in the world, we learned that God’s ultimate plan was not to continue a physical marker as a sign of who belongs to Him, but to anticipate a new spiritual marker that happens internally.

In places like Jeremiah 31:31–34, we read about how God’s plan is to give His people new hearts—to take hearts of stone and make them hearts of flesh; to take a previous law that was written on stone tablets, and to instead write it on the hearts of His people (**Ezek. 36:25-27**). The new sign of the eternal covenant will be a circumcised internal heart, which occurs through true faith in God.

As the people of God experienced a circumcised heart (an internal sign of the covenant), God continues to use an external sign—baptism. **Baptism** is the physical sign that God’s people have been spiritually marked off from the world. It’s a visible indicator of the internal circumcision that a believer has already experienced.

The term “baptize” comes from the Greek word “*baptizo*,” which means to submerge something (or someone) underwater. Prior to the time of Jesus, this was something that was practiced by Jews as a ritual bath to seek forgiveness from God. It was also something practiced by Gentile converts to Judaism. However, Christian baptism differs from the baptism practiced by John the Baptist.¹ This included what happened in Jesus’ baptism (for more information about Jesus’ baptism, read the article in our appendix).

“Baptism is the physical sign that God’s people have been spiritually marked off from the world.”

At the conclusion of Jesus’ ministry, prior to His ascension, we read of His giving the “great commission,” telling His disciples: **“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”** (Matt. 28:19–20). We immediately see this being practiced in the early church, as recorded in the book of Acts when followers of Jesus would immerse (*baptizo*) new converts into Christianity. For instance, in Acts 8:36–39 we read of the Ethiopian Eunuch baptized in a body of water. And in 16:13–15 we read of Lydia being baptized in a river. All the baptisms we see in the New Testament share a few different qualities: they take

¹ *The Baker Illustrated Background Commentary* (2020, Baker) Ed. Duvall and Hays p. 859–60

place by immersion, they happen to new converts, and it's something only practiced by people who have publicly declared what they believe—this is why we practice believer's baptism because this is what the New Testament presents (**Acts 2:37–38, 41; 8:12**).

Baptism doesn't save—it's what saved people do. Does that mean that as baptists, we should question the authenticity of our brothers and sisters (like Lutherans or Presbyterians) who baptize infants? By no means! We can disagree with them because we all find our salvation in what Jesus has done and that He has saved us by grace through faith (**Eph. 2:8–10**). But that doesn't mean that baptism isn't important. We definitely think it matters, both for the one being baptized, and for the local church. So what is happening at baptism?

There is nothing special about the baptismal water—it's literally the same water that comes from the city of Brentwood that any resident gets in their home. It's not “spirit-filled



“Baptism doesn’t save—it’s what saved people do.”

water,” but it is used in an event that involves spirit-filled people. During this special, sacred time, two important things are happening: the local church is affirming that the believer is united to Christ on the basis of their testimony and profession of faith, and the believer is making a discernible profession of faith, publicly committing him/herself to Christ and His people. Pastor and author Bobby Jamieson describes baptism like this,

“Baptism is an open declaration that you belong to Jesus. And if you’re reluctant to openly declare yourself a follower of Jesus, then baptism is what you most need to do! Faith in Jesus is meant to redefine you: what’s true about your past, present, and future, who your family is, and who has your highest allegiance. Baptism is a way of picturing and proclaiming all of these realities.”²

² Bobby Jamieson, *Understanding Baptism* (2016, B&H) p. 19

Review Questions

1. What does the word baptism mean?
2. What is the ultimate point of Christian baptism?
3. During baptism, what is happening for the person being baptized? What is happening for the local congregation?

THE MODERN-LOCAL CHURCH



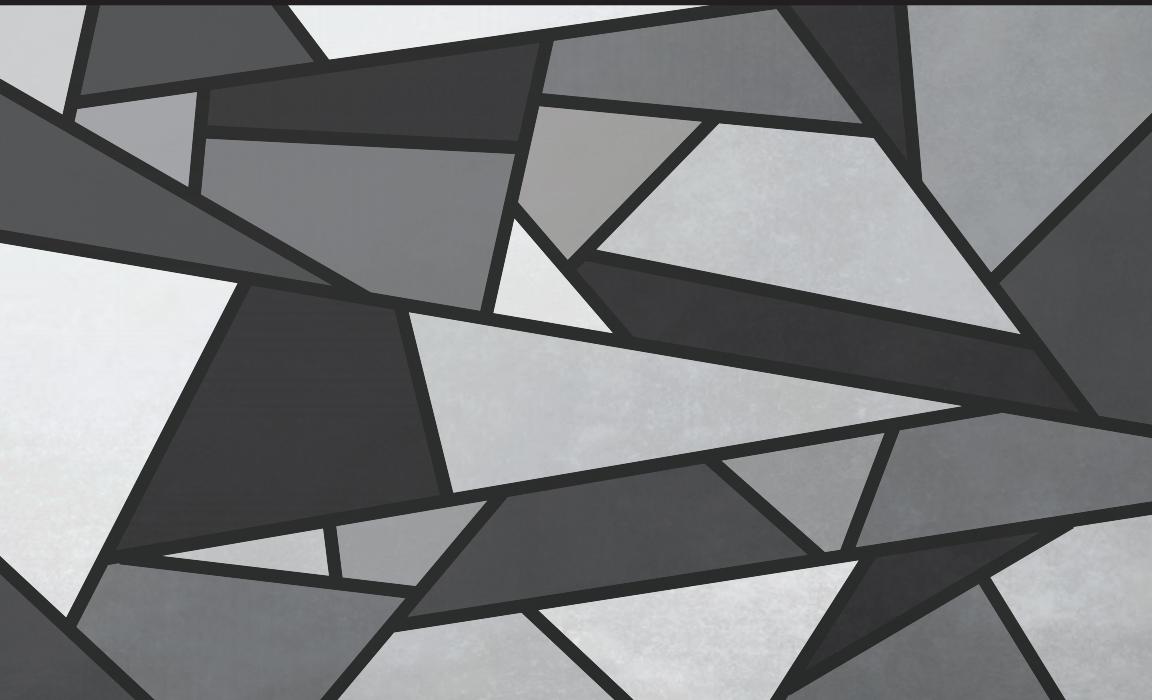
Baptism isn't merely a **surgical** act that we're bound to participate in; there's actually an applicational element that occurs at a public baptism. First off, Christian baptism isn't something that the Christian does alone; we don't baptize ourselves in the shower or bathtub. Secondly, it's not something that we can merely do to others at will either. If we're swimming with someone in a pool, we cannot just sneak up behind them and declare "you're baptized!" and then dunk them below the surface.

Baptism is something that's done in the context of the gathered local church. It's something celebrated by the people of God in their community. It's a believer going public with his or her faith, and a church publically witnessing this and affirming the choice he or she is making. Since this is a public affair, there are public benefits, as Christian baptism is a powerful means of grace for the local church.





“This experience also increases the faith of the congregation, as the congregation is reminded of the gospel as well as their own baptism.”



First, public baptism provides accountability and encouragement. By getting baptized within the local church, the local church now knows who is going public with their faith, which allows them to identify with a particular local congregation. This means that we are bound to hold one another accountable in our conduct. If I have witnessed my next-door neighbor being baptized and a week later see them outside their home screaming at their spouse (or a door-to-door salesperson), I have the duty to remind them of the gospel and the public proclamation they made to identify themselves with Jesus. But we also find encouragement in baptism.⁴

Second, by engaging in this public proclamation of their testimony of faith, the person being baptized is increasing in their own Christian boldness. But the benefits are not merely for the one being baptized. This experience also increases the faith of the congregation, as the congregation is reminded of the gospel as well as their own baptism. This is why it is so important to not only celebrate baptisms among the public gathering of the local church, but for the members of the church to be in attendance and witness this celebration!

⁴ Note: baptism is a one-time event for the believer—Christians are never “re-baptized.” If someone was baptized as an infant, we would want them to be baptized as a professing believer because we wouldn’t recognize that first event as a biblical baptism. Likewise, there are people who may have been consciously baptized at a previous age in life, but they actually weren’t a Christian. In this case we would have them baptized, as that first event wasn’t done from a spiritually regenerated heart. Also, to avoid any confusion regarding the above chapter, when becoming a member of a new congregation (like if you moved), you would not need to be re-baptized, as true baptism is a one-time event. If you have questions about this, we would recommend sitting down with a pastor and talking about it.

Responding Questions

- 1. Personal Assessment:** Have you been baptized? If so, when you look back on that special moment, what are you reminded of?

If you haven't, why not? Is something holding you back?

Is there a theological issue that is keeping you from going through with it?

Have you sought out the wisdom of pastors/elders to process through this?

2. Group Conversation & Reflection: Over the past 100 years (especially in America), baptism has become more and more of an individual/private thing that Christians want to do. Some ask to be baptized in private, or even in the backyard pool of their Small Group (without the congregation present). After going through this week's study, has your perspective on baptism changed at all?

Do you see a richer significance for how baptism brings grace to the entire local church and is not merely for the person being baptized?

3. Action Steps: If you're a Christian and haven't been baptized, what's stopping you?

Will you make the commitment, today, to become baptized?

If you already are baptized, will you make the commitment to start attending our local church baptisms and corporately welcome fellow brothers and sisters into the joys of this sacred practice?

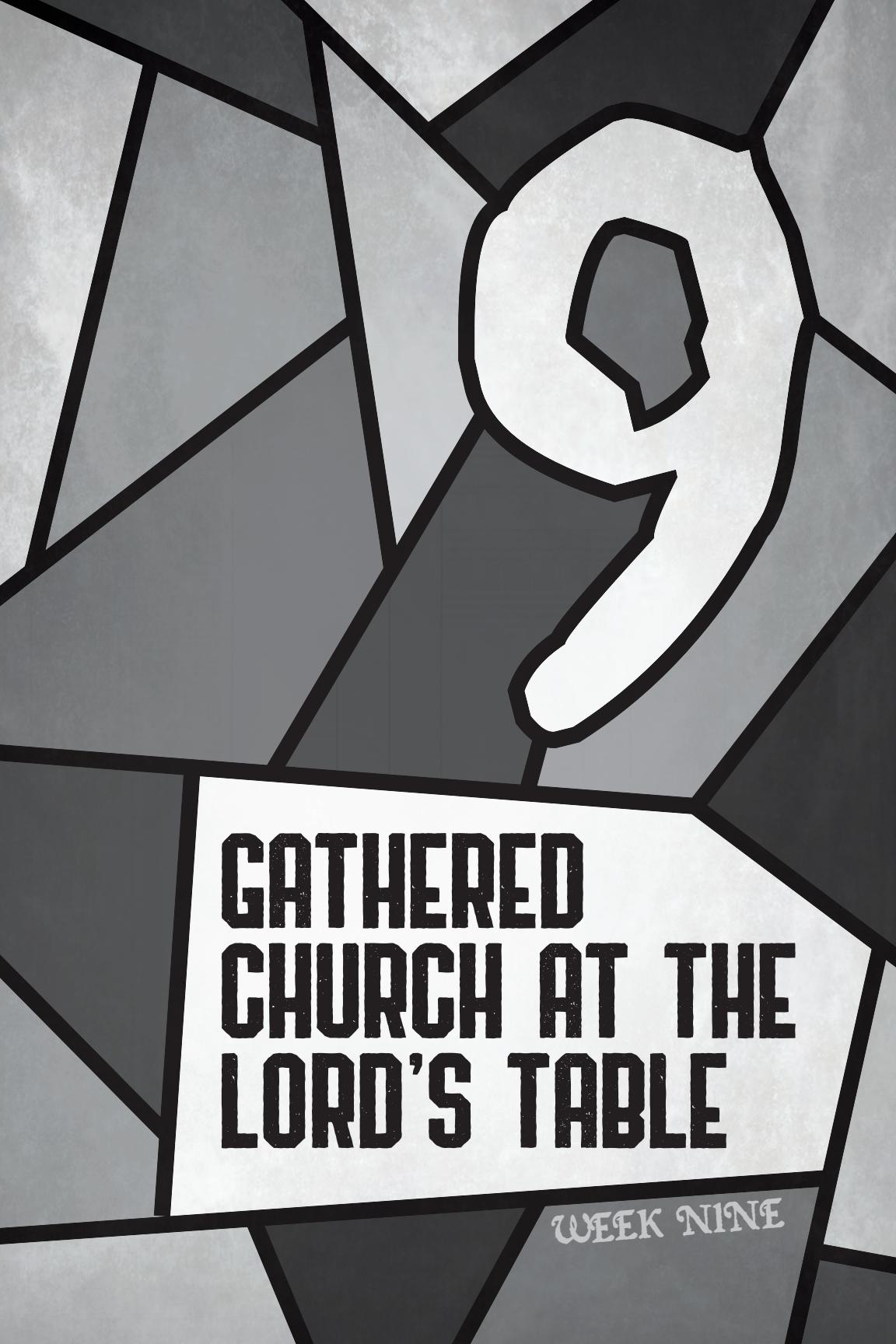
EXHORTATION

To the unbaptized: let us not be ashamed of the gospel, but go public with our testimony. To the baptized congregation: let us be strengthened by the baptism of others, being reminded of how God has raised us to new life.



NOTES

The Baptizing Church



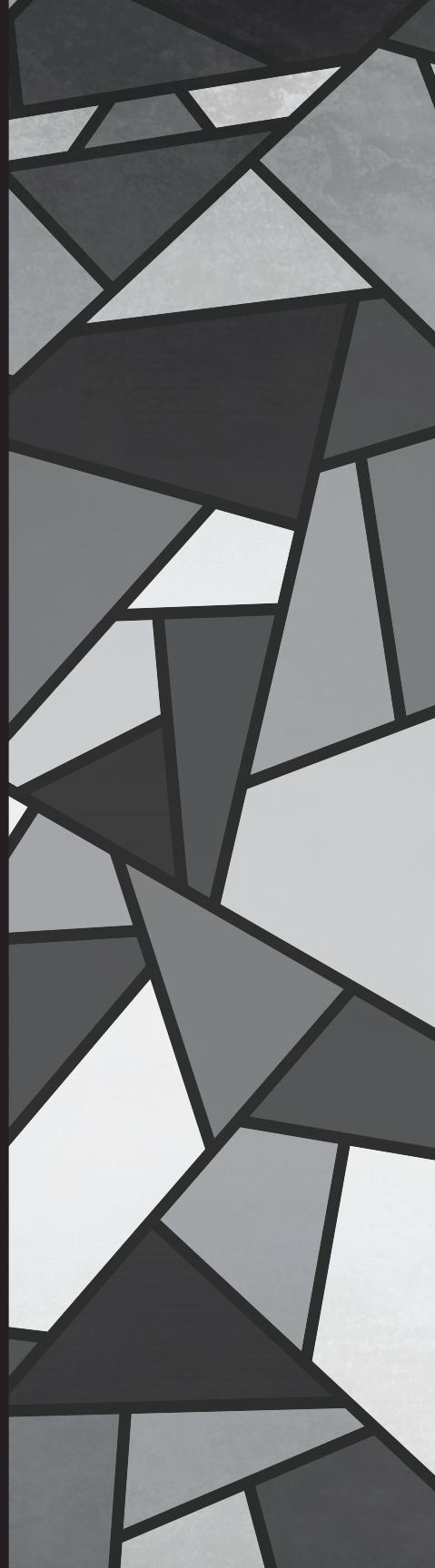
GATHERED CHURCH AT THE LORD'S TABLE

WEEK NINE

OUR CASE STUDY

Luke 22:14-20

When the hour came, Jesus and his apostles reclined at the table. 15 And he said to them, “I have eagerly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. 16 For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it finds fulfillment in the kingdom of God.” 17 After taking the cup, he gave thanks and said, “Take this and divide it among you. 18 For I tell you I will not drink again from the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” 19 And he took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.” 20 In the same way, after the supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”



1. Do you know the origin of the Passover meal, and why Jesus was so eager to eat this particular meal with His disciples?
 2. List all the things that Jesus wanted the disciples to remember about this supper.
 3. Do you know what the New Covenant is and why Jesus said it was “in my blood?”

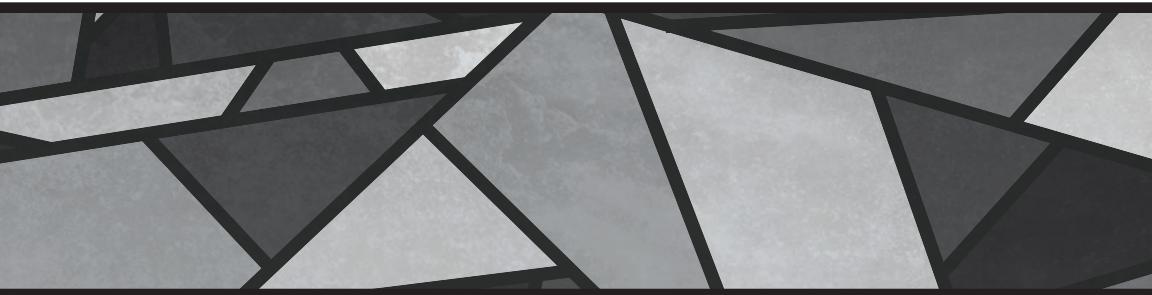
THE HISTORIC-UNIVERSAL CHURCH

This week we'll take a look at a very intimate yet communal part of the gathered church—communion. Communion, also known as the Lord's Supper, is something experienced corporately as a church. Like baptism, communion is a **sacrament** that Jesus instructed His followers to partake in, but communion is different. It's an ongoing mark of discipleship, a sign for us that we are His, and He will continue to sanctify us as we continually commit ourselves to Him. As we will learn, the Lord's Supper isn't so much something we do but the way Christ enables the church to enjoy His presence together, regularly.

Communion reminds us of the promises of God fulfilled in Jesus Christ:

As we begin to examine our case study in the gospel of Luke, we see Jesus and His disciples in the upper room eating the **Passover** meal. The Israelites were instructed to put the blood of an innocent lamb over the lintel of the door in their homes to protect them from God's judgment. They ate the sacrificed lamb with unleavened bread to signify their readiness for their journey to freedom (**Exod. 12:8–11**). The Passover meal was intended to be celebrated for generations to come (**Exod. 12:14–20, 24–28**).

In the upper room, Jesus told His disciples that He eagerly desired to eat this particular Passover meal with them because He was now instituting a new dimension of **redemptive history** for the church. He would



become the innocent lamb sacrificed to protect those who are covered in His blood. God used the Old Testament Passover to remind the Israelites of their deliverance from the plague of death. Now, together with His disciples, Christ instituted the Lord's Supper as a remembrance for the church of His death for her redemption. The Passover meal told the story of redemption from slavery through the blood of a lamb. The communion meal tells the story of redemption from sin through the blood of Jesus—the Lamb of God.¹

Jesus said, *“This is my body, given for you; do this in remembrance of me”* and, *“This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood”* (Luke 22:19–20). When we participate in the Lord's supper together as a church, as one body, we are engaging in a practice that symbolizes the death of Christ. Our actions give a picture of His death for us. When the bread is broken, it represents the breaking of Christ's body, and when the cup is poured out, it symbolizes the pouring out of Christ's blood for us for the forgiveness of sins.

Jesus also gave great hope to His disciples (and us) when He said, *“For I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes”* (Luke 22:18). From this, we see that participating in the Lord's Supper now also encourages us to think ahead, to a future time when we will all sit at the table of the Lord in heaven, at the marriage supper of the Lamb (Rev. 19:1–9).

¹ Chester, Tim *Truth We Can Touch: How Baptism and Communion Shape our Lives*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), pg. 81

Communion is an ongoing covenant renewal between God and the church:

During the Passover meal, Jesus said, “*This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood*” (Luke 22:20). The cup represents the new covenant, a new relationship-forming agreement through which we become God’s people, and He becomes our God.

In the new covenant, God promises in part a renewed heart, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, His law written on our hearts, and a personal relationship with Him through the forgiveness of sins. The writer of Hebrews powerfully exclaims, “*And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, ‘This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds,’ then he adds, ‘I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.’ Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin*” (Heb. 10:15–18).

As a church, when we come to communion, we must remember the body and blood of Jesus, but we must also remember that His death was establishing the new covenant. Not only did Jesus inaugurate the new covenant, but He also met every requirement so that those who are part of the new covenant know it was God’s grace that brought them in.

“When sharing in the sacraments together, as the church, we are affirming that we are one before Him and that we are completely submitted to Him.”

Communion is a sign of the unity of the church:

When it was time to begin the meal, Jesus had all His apostles with Him. He said, *“I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer”* (Luke 22:15). When sharing in the sacraments together, as the church, we are affirming that we are one before Him and that we are completely submitted to Him. We also remember that it was Christ who made this oneness possible. The communion table and the partaking of the sacraments become an act that strengthens our unity by gathering around the One who made us His body.

Gathering together at the Lord’s table also serves as a form of accountability. We are not individual Christians who are free to do whatever we wish, but a body of believers accountable to God and each other. Paul reminded the Corinthian church that, *“The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? 17 Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread”* (1 Cor. 10:16–17). The invitation to participate in the communion meal as the body of Christ should not be taken lightly.

Review Questions

1. What is the significance of the bread and the cup? What do they represent?
2. What are the benefits of belonging to the new covenant? How is communion like a vow renewal?
3. Why is it important not to merely consider communion as an individual experience but to partake in communion together with other believers?

THE MODERN-LOCAL CHURCH

Jesus knew we would need communion. He knows that we're frail, prone to wander and that our faith, at times, can be weak. Fear, doubt, and worry can all creep in and disrupt our unity and create tension in the body of Christ. Jesus provided the communion meal as a gift to the church to strengthen our faith by reminding us of His great love and sacrifice. The goal of the sacraments is not for God's sake but for ours. God uses them as a means of grace to build up our faith.

When we participate together in communion and the bread and cup are handed to us, consider it as God's promise to you, His pledge, a reminder of His covenant. And as we receive the sacraments, as a church, we are renewing our vow to Him, offering our lives to Him as His disciples. The Lord's Supper is God's assurance to us that we belong to Christ, that His grace is sufficient to keep us secure until His return.

Something powerful happens for the church during communion; it's not just about remembering what Jesus did in the past. Something is happening in the here and now. The communion meal involves us, and we do something, we eat something. Jesus is spiritually present in a special way as we partake of the bread and wine. We meet Him at His table, to which He comes to give Himself to us. This unifies us as brothers and sisters in Christ. It reminds us that we are not our own; we are part of His body.



Responding Questions

- 1. Personal Assessment:** Are there times when you struggle with fear or worry when your faith seems weak?

What is happening in your life or relationships that might be causing this to happen?

- 2. Group Conversation & Reflection:** Discuss as a group how gathering with other believers and encountering Jesus through taking communion can help strengthen us during difficult times.

3. Action Steps: The next time you participate in a communion service, what might you do differently?

How can you experience communion with other brothers and sisters?

What are some things about Jesus, and His church, that you will now focus on as you partake in the sacraments?

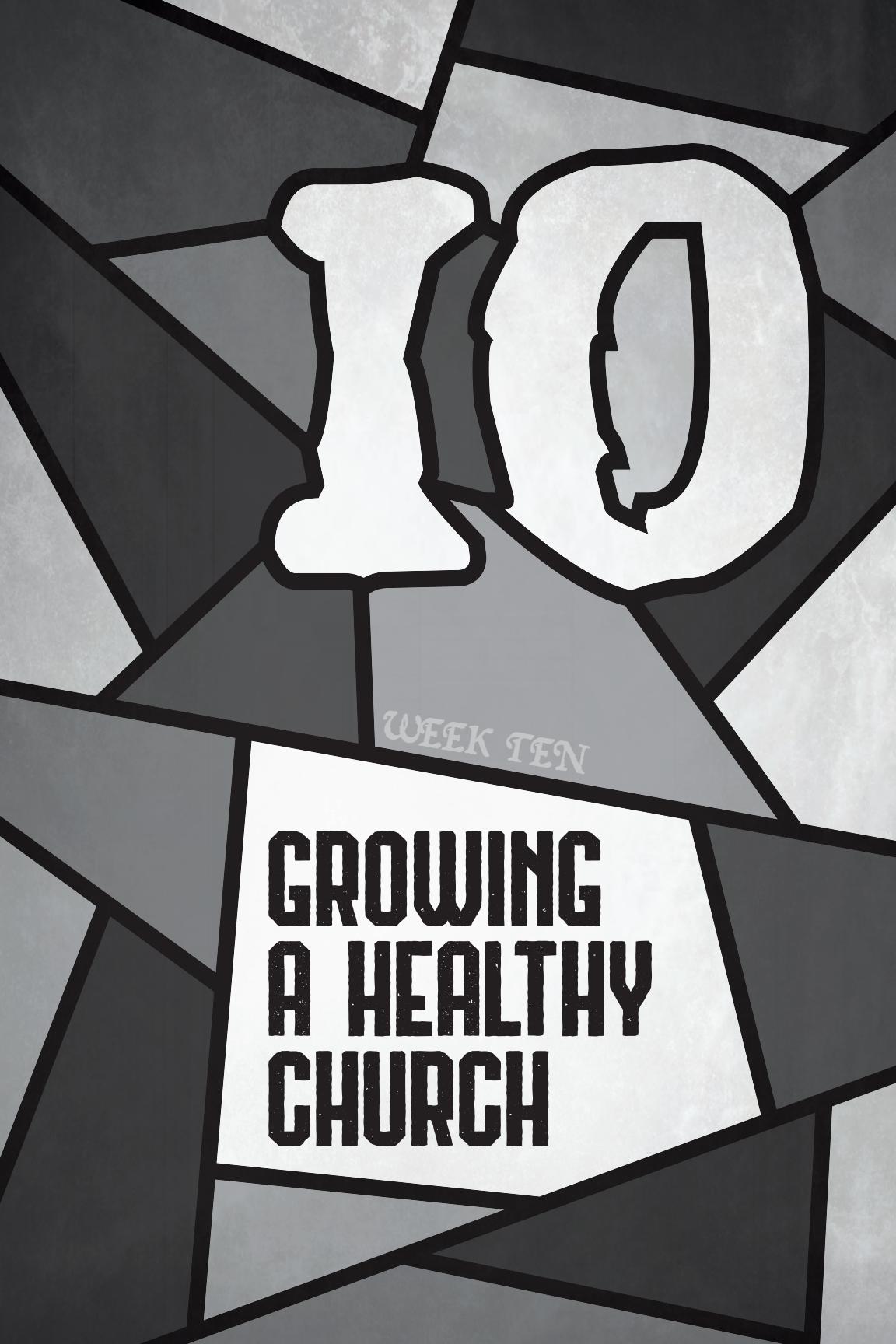
EXHORTATION

Now, in light of everything our Lord Jesus has accomplished for us, may we freely come to His table and humbly seek His face. May we always remember His body broken for us, His blood poured out for the forgiveness of our sins, and His promise to come back to eat another meal with us, face to face.



NOTES

Gathered Church at the Lord's Table

A graphic of a stained glass window with a grid of dark grey and black panes. In the center is a white circle containing a stylized profile of a person's head facing right. The text 'WEEK TEN' is positioned in the lower right area of the window.

WEEK TEN

GROWING A HEALTHY CHURCH

OUR CASE STUDY

Romans 12

1 I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. 2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

3 For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. 4 For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, 5 so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members

one of another. 6 Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; 7 if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; 8 the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

9 Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. 10 Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. 11 Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord. 12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer. 13 Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

1. Why did God give gifts to members of Christ's body, the church?

2. Why did God give different gifts to different people, and what happens if some people don't use their gifts?

3. How do we love one another with genuine, brotherly affection?

THE HISTORIC-UNIVERSAL CHURCH

How does one measure health? In particular, how does one measure the health of a church? The documentary *The Vietnam War*, produced by Ken Burns,¹ highlights something known as the McNamara Fallacy.² George McNamara was the US Secretary of Defense during the war. His method of determining success was based on an analytic model of quantitative metrics and statistical measurements, often while ignoring other means of observation. In other words, if you cannot measure what is really important, you should place importance only on the things that you can actually measure. Well-known management thinker Peter Drucker put it another way when he said, “You can’t manage what you can’t measure.”

Those ideas may have merit in some parts of society or business, but too often they shape our idea of a healthy church. If we look at a church as something that must have “solid measurables” in order to be considered as successful or healthy, then we place an unnecessary emphasis on the number of programs we can offer and the number of people who attend. A church should certainly be a place where a person feels welcomed and loved, but equating numerical results with health leads a church to become

“To the early church, success was not attained through an easy message and a comfortable experience.”

attractional. The approach becomes, “Whatever we need to do, whatever we need to say, whatever we need to offer to get people in the doors, we will do it.” If we were solely concerned with the numerical growth of the church, then we should make entertainment the aim of all of our programs. Instead of talking about the true gospel, the reality of sin, and the need to repent, we could instead talk about how to be “better” in the world: better parents, better citizens, better employees, and more. This strategy will certainly result in more numbers, but not greater health. People will be attracted to this type of church, and they will come, but when they do not feel loved or cared for, they will leave just as quickly. This approach results in a cultural Christianity that wilts under hardship because it is not deeply rooted, or is choked out

by the cares of the world (see Jesus’ Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13).

The early church viewed success a bit differently. To them, success was not attained through an easy message and a comfortable experience. Acts 5 tells of the time when the Apostles were arrested by the religious authorities of the day. They were locked up in prison, but an angel of the Lord opened the prison doors and brought them out (**Acts 5:19**). The Apostles were brought in to be questioned by the religious council. At the end of their questioning, they were warned not to continue preaching about Jesus, and they were beaten and released. Look at their response:

Then they left the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the name. And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that the Christ is Jesus. (**Acts 5:41-42**)

¹ Burns, Ken & Novick, Lynn. *The Vietnam War*. 2017.

² O’Mahony, S. *Medicine and the McNamara Fallacy*. Journal of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, vol. 47, issue 3, 281-287. 2017.

To the Apostles, success meant that they were considered worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus. Persecution has never been considered a strong marketing strategy. The early church did not grow because their message was attractional. No one thought to themselves, “Wow, we can be beaten? Sign me up!” Instead, the early church grew as disciples were made by believing the true gospel, they were hardened as steel in the forge of persecution, and they exercised the gifts that God had given them and learned to love one another.

In Romans 12:1–2, the Apostle Paul urged the church to present themselves as living sacrifices, surrendering their wills to God as an act of worship. They were not to conform to the world’s pattern of thinking, but were to be transformed by renewing their minds as they think rightly about doctrine and the truth of the gospel. In doing so, they would be able to discern the will of God. The first two verses of the chapter may be quite familiar, but it is important to note that all of the “yous” listed are plural. These instructions—to present yourselves as living sacrifices as an act of worship and renew your minds to discern God’s will—are for the church, not just for individuals; it’s for “you all.”

Paul continued to tell them in 12:3–5 that we should act humbly toward one another because we are all members of the same body of Christ, the church, and that this binds us together (we are members of one another). In 12:6–8, Paul explained that God has given different people in the church different gifts that should be used regularly, and should be used for the good of the church: *prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, generosity, leadership, and mercy*.

Paul then gave the church instructions about how they should treat one another. He said that people in the church should love one another with genuine, familial affection. We should strive to be the first to show honor to others. We should hate what is evil and hold tightly to what is good, serving the Lord with zeal. We should rejoice hopefully, endure troubles, and pray always. Finally, we should show hospitality to one another and work to meet the needs of those in the church who are struggling. This results in a church that is healthy, and a church that grows by making disciples instead of making spectators.



“To the Apostles, success meant that they were considered worthy to suffer for the name of Jesus.”

Review Questions

1. Why might we be tempted to measure church health by looking at the outward signs, like the number of programs offered, number of people attending, etc.?
 2. Why is church health hard to measure?
 3. If the modern-day church followed the model of the early church, it might be difficult to attract people. But what might cause people to stay?

THE MODERN-LOCAL CHURCH



It is not hard to track the number of programs a church offers. It is easy enough to count attendance on Sundays and at other meetings. But these “measurables” are powerless to tell us anything about how healthy a church is. How do we measure *enduring tribulation*? How can we chart the progress of *outdoing one another in showing honor*? How can we compare year-on-year data for *loving one another with genuine affection*?

It is easy to think, “Wow, our church has a lot of programs and a lot of people, so we must be healthy.” To make matters worse, the modern church faces the temptation to compare itself to other churches in the neighborhood with more programs and more people. But the church grows healthy not by quantitatively increasing in size, but as its members live qualitatively different lives of surrender, thinking rightly, exercising our gifts for our common good, and loving one another.

Romans 12 teaches us how to grow as a healthy church. We must love one another with genuine affection, outdo one another in showing honor, practice humility, think rightly about what God has said, and surrender ourselves as living sacrifices as an act of worship.

Responding Questions

- 1. Personal Assessment:** Romans 12 instructs us in the “*one anothers*” (love one another, outdo one another in showing honor, etc.), but it also says that we should use the gifts that God has given us for the good of the church. What gift has God given you that you might be able to use to encourage and strengthen the church?

2. Group Conversation & Reflection: The example of the early church, particularly as described by Paul in Romans 12, sets a very high standard for community life among the gathered faithful. What kind of shared joy and peace would result from living this way?

What might keep us from living this way?

3. Action Steps: How can we serve one another by using the gifts and abilities God has given us?

How can you practically begin to do that in your community?

What makes it easier (or harder) to love one another and outdo one another in showing honor?

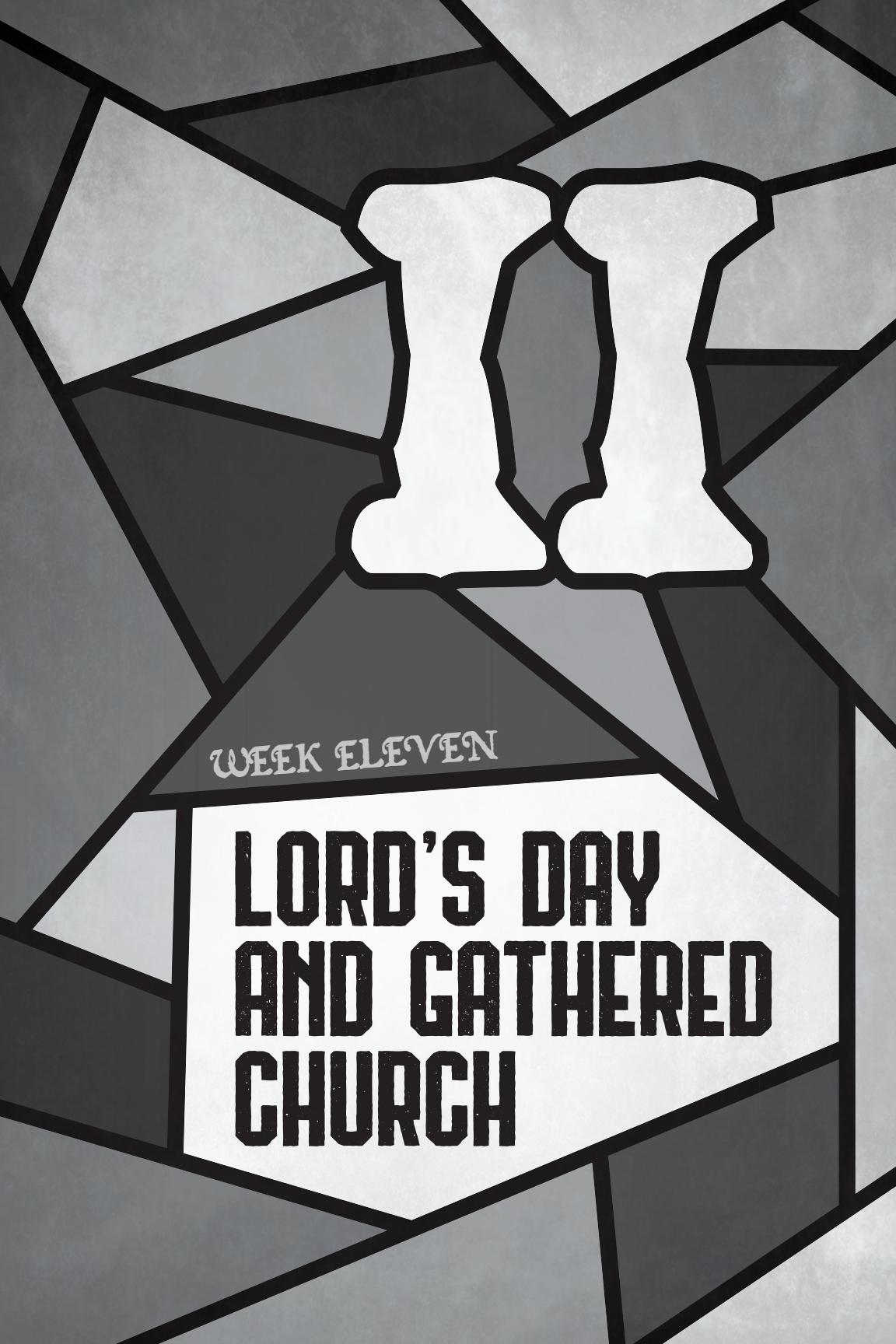
EXHORTATION

May we be the people of God who use the gifts He has given us, who love one another with genuine affection, who outdo one another in showing honor, who are transformed as we renew our minds, and who willingly offer ourselves as living sacrifices to the Lord!



NOTES

Growing a Healthy Church

A large, stylized graphic of a stained glass window is the background for the entire image. It features a central white cross-like shape with various colored glass panes (dark grey, light grey, white) surrounding it, set against a dark grey textured background.

WEEK ELEVEN

LORD'S DAY AND GATHERED CHURCH

OUR CASE STUDY

Nehemiah 8:1-12

And all the people gathered as one man into the square before the Water Gate. And they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses that the LORD had commanded Israel. 2 So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, both men and women and all who could understand what they heard, on the first day of the seventh month. 3 And he read from it facing the square before the Water Gate from early morning until mid-day, in the presence of the men and the women and those who could understand. And the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law. 4 And Ezra the scribe stood on a wooden platform that they had made for the purpose. And beside him stood Mattithiah, Shema, Ananiah, Uriah, Hilkiah, and Maaseiah on his right hand, and Pedaiah, Mishael,

Malchijah, Hashum, Hashbaddanah, Zechariah, and Meshullam on his left hand. 5 And Ezra opened the book in the sight of all the people, for he was above all the people, and as he opened it all the people stood. 6 And Ezra blessed the LORD, the great God, and all the people answered, “Amen, Amen,” lifting up their hands. And they bowed their heads and worshiped the Lord with their faces to the ground. 7 Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodiah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law, while the people remained in their places. 8 They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading.

9 And Nehemiah, who was the governor, and Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, “This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn or weep.” For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law. 10 Then he said to them, “Go your way. Eat the fat and drink sweet wine and send portions to anyone who has nothing ready, for this day is holy to our Lord. And do not be grieved, for the joy of the

LORD is your strength.” 11 So the Levites calmed all the people, saying, “Be quiet, for this day is holy; do not be grieved.” 12 And all the people went their way to eat and drink and to send portions and to make great rejoicing, because they had understood the words that were declared to them.



1. What type of people were present at this event?

2. What did Ezra do, and what was his goal?

3. How did the people respond to the reading and what were the factors that helped them to respond in that way?

THE HISTORIC-UNIVERSAL CHURCH

“Worship is a profoundly relational act in which an individual or community conveys reverence and adoration to God.”¹

The majority of the first-century church were Jews who also worshipped at the synagogue on the traditional Sabbath day (Saturday) to study God’s Word through teachings and Scripture reading. In addition to this, they also celebrated the resurrection of Christ on Sundays with the Lord’s Supper. Eventually, the body of believers grew to become more gentile, and together they combined the element of *Scripture* (word) and the *Lord’s Supper* (table) into their services on Sundays. By the 3rd century, the church added two more elements to the services called *Gathering* and *Sending* to establish the four-fold worship service we continue to use today. Overall, Christian worship continues to center on *Gathering* (call to worship and praise), *Word* (reading and preaching of God’s Word), *Table* (the Lord’s Supper), and *Sending* (benediction).²

Through the New Testament, we can see glimpses of believers gathering for the Apostles’ teachings, common meals, and prayers (**Acts 2:42**). And Paul’s writings also convey guiding principles, including a call to order (**1 Cor. 14:40**), hospitality (**1 Cor. 11:33**), and attitudes in worship (**Col 3:16–17**). These patterns of worship (or **liturgies**) are supposed to all pivot towards one thing—and that is the *Whom* of the entire worship service.³ They gathered as a congregation to focus on the God who revealed Himself to us through His Word, and they dare not gather to experience good feelings or promote personal agendas. He is the Creator, All-Sufficient One, perfect in all His ways while we are created, dependent, and fallen in all our ways. Worship is a

“Worship is a profoundly relational act in which an individual or community conveys reverence and adoration to God.”

time that we, though corrupt as we are, get to meet with God in a “highly focused way.”⁴ Therefore, the order of worship (liturgy) that is saturated in the calling to mind of God’s ways and characteristics is foundational in framing the heart and mind of the congregation. Since God spoke to us first, the reading of God’s Word had a prominent place in the temple, as well as the first-century church.

¹ Treier, David and Walter Elwell. 2017. “Worship.” In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 952-954. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.

² Scheer, Greg. 2014. Calvin Institute of Christian Worship. “Four-Fold Pattern of Worship.” Accessed May 13, 2021. <https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/four-fold-pattern-of-worship>.

³ Lignon, Duncan. 2014. Lignon Duncan.com. “What Gathering Worship Should Look Like.” Accessed May 1, 2021. <https://ligonduncan.com/what-gathered-worship-should-look-like-god-centered/>

⁴ Witvliet, John. 2016. Reformed Worship. “The Super-Concentrated Practice of Public Worship.” Accessed May 1, 2021. <https://www.reformedworship.org/article/march-2016/super-concentrated-practice-public-worship>

The Word of God being read, explained, sung, and taught is the nucleus that all activities are to surround. But worship is not one-sided, and we do not worship a cold, indifferent God. Therefore, our response is also an important part of it all. God is pleased to hear the congregation sing praise, pray, and present offerings as a response to the truth conveyed in His Word. The entire service is a remembrance of God's initiation with His people, and people responding to God in obedience.

The early church was careful to distinguish itself from the forms of pagan worship around them that provided ecstaticism, self-soothing reassurance, and sensual elements to attract people to attend. The early church focused on the Word, the Table, and the fellowship of believers by distinguishing themselves from the world around them by fo-

cusing their service on God. Biblical scholar Don Carson famously said, "If you seek peace, you will not find it; if you seek Christ, you will find peace. If you seek joy, you will not find it; if you seek Christ, you will find joy. If you seek holiness, you will not find it; if you seek Christ, you will find holiness. If you seek experiences of worship, you will not find them; if you worship the living God, you will experience something of what is reflected in the Psalms."⁵

During the *Gathering* part of the worship, *Scripture* is read to the congregation to remind the people of God's rescue and salvific work through Christ that fundamentally changed their identity. And then songs that portrayed such adoration and proclaimed scriptural truths are sung as a response from the people. Prayers of adoration, confession, and thanksgiving are also offered

“...Worship of God with God’s people has always been centered around God’s Word.”

corporately to allow room for the people to respond back to God. During the *Word* component of the service, Scripture is explained and taught for the understanding and reminding of God's work in reconciling all things back to Himself in creation. When the *Table* component is exercised, the people are reminded of the cross and Christ's atonement. And the *Sending* part of the service is a time of blessing that frames all that we absorbed during the service as a promise.

Like what we just read in the book of Nehemiah, worship of God with God's people has always been centered around God's Word. And the early church's way of organizing their worship reflected their theology of worship to be properly centered on God and not humankind.

⁵ Carson, D.A., "Worship the Lord Your God": The Perennial Challenge," in *Worship: Adoration and Action*, ed. D.A. Carson (Baker, 1993) p. 15

Review Questions

1. How did each element of the early church's worship practically reflect their focus on the Word?
2. What is the difference between God-centered worship and human-centered worship?
3. Why is it important to center worship around God's word?

THE MODERN-LOCAL CHURCH

You have heard the word “liturgy” this week used to refer to the order of worship the early church habitually practiced. All churches actually have their own liturgies since liturgy is really just a pattern of worship a church has adopted over time. Liturgical activities together make up the one event we call Sunday worship. Each church’s pattern of worship (liturgy) deeply reflects its own theological visions and values. The church in Africa, Indonesia, or Russia may meet in small houses and sit in circles while singing praises, one with instruments and one in acapella, but they will all have one thing in common—their entire service is centered on God. This centering is the key element that threads all the components of the service together. The singing, praying, preaching, and benedictions should all reflect scriptural truth. And that truth is that God sought us first, and we are simply responding in humility, gratitude, and fellowship. Therefore, the order of worship should reflect that same truth even in its order of importance. First, God’s Word is read to us, then we respond in singing praises. Next, God’s Word is preached to us; subsequently, we respond by prayer and confession. Though the New Testament does not prescribe a definite order of worship for churches today, the church should consider with careful thought how its worship service draws attention to how God works in the lives of the church.



“The singing, praying, preaching, and benedictions should all reflect scriptural truth.”

Responding Questions

- 1. Personal Assessment:** Our understanding of what Sunday worship is affects our attitude during worship, and our attitude of worship affects how we live our lives throughout the week. We should see a continuation from Sunday to the rest of the week when we approach our lives in spirit and truth. What have you learned in this week's study about the Sunday gathering of God's people that has surprised you?

2. Group Conversation & Reflection: What is challenging about the fact that worship should be a continuation from Sunday to the rest of the week?

What are the areas of our lives throughout the week that are easily compartmentalized to be lived apart from worship?

What is encouraging about the fact that we can live our lives as a response to God instead of on our own efforts?

3. Action Steps: What are ways you could start your Sunday morning worship time with a short prayer of confession?

How could you do this as a family?

How could Bible memorization help with this?

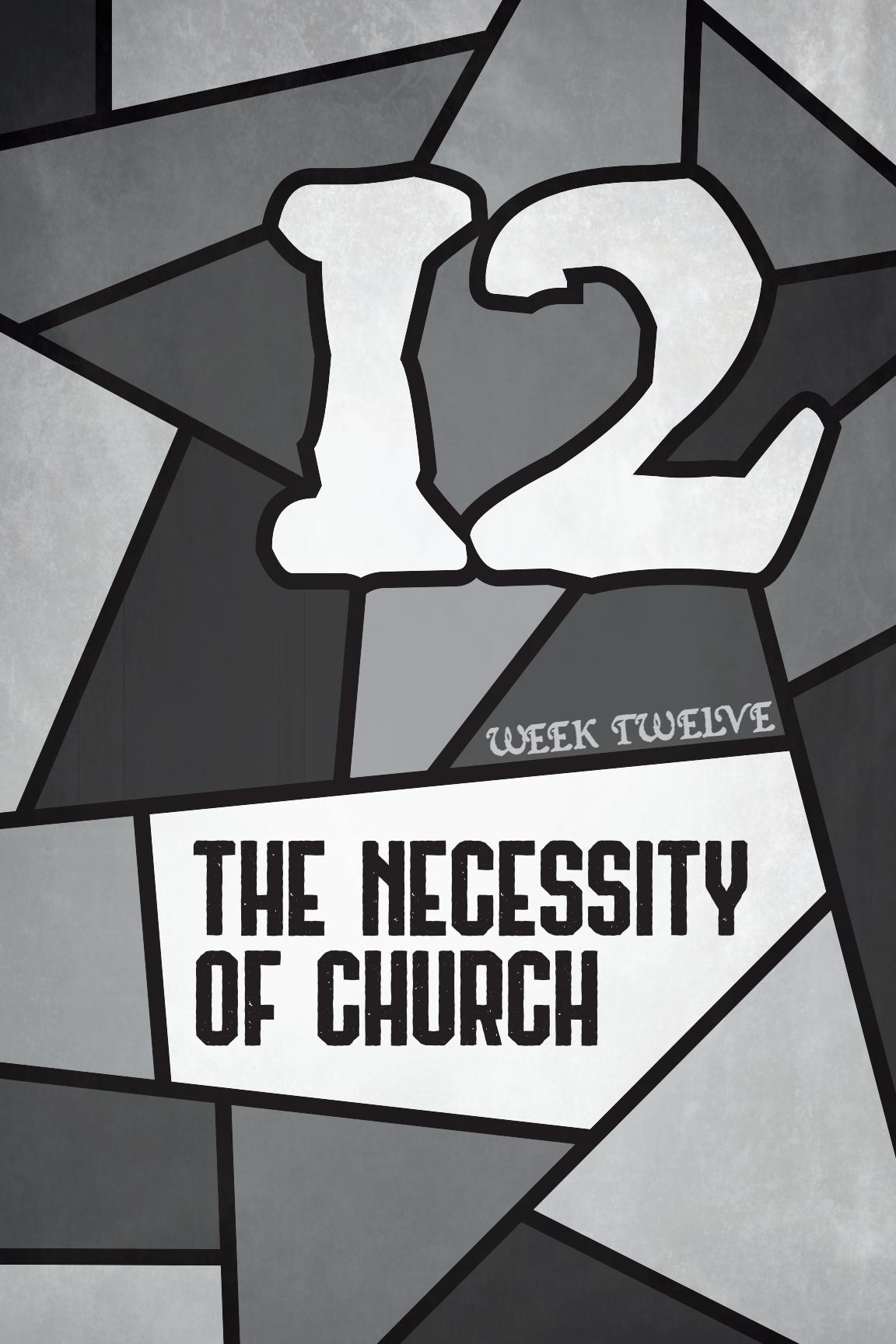
EXHORTATION

Let us go to God confidently on Sunday mornings with awe to be ministered to by His truth. And let us go to the house of the Lord with joy to meet with Him and one another. He who initiates, sanctifies, and keeps His saints is worthy to be worshipped on that sacred hour and throughout the week. If we have fallen into the thinking that Sunday mornings have become a time of more busyness or even burden, then let us come to Him in confession and dependence. The Lord wants His people to understand what is being sung, read, preached, and prayed. And when we do, we too shall have strength and joy from the LORD.



NOTES

Lord's Day & Gathered Church

A stylized graphic of a stained glass window, composed of various geometric shapes in shades of gray and black, set against a light gray background.

WEEK TWELVE

THE NECESSITY OF CHURCH

OUR CASE STUDY

Revelation 21:1-10, 14, 22-27

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. 2 And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. 4 He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.”

5 And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Also he said, “Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.” 6 And he said to

me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment. 7 The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son. 8 But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the detestable, as for murderers, the sexually immoral, sorcerers, idolaters, and all liars, their portion will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.”

9 Then came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues and spoke to me, saying, “Come, I will show you the Bride, the wife of the Lamb.” 10 And he carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God... 14 And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb...

22 And I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. 23 And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and its lamp is the Lamb. 24 By its light will the nations walk, and the kings of the earth will

bring their glory into it, 25 and its gates will never be shut by day—and there will be no night there. 26 They will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations. 27 But nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb's book of life.



1. What does this passage tell us about how heaven (the spiritual) and earth (the physical) will be experienced when God fully establishes His kingdom?
2. What does one have to do to receive the “heritage” (to be God’s son)?
3. What is the job description (or the role that is played) by the people whose names are written in the Lamb’s book of life?

THE HISTORIC-UNIVERSAL CHURCH

John: "Can I ask you something? Is this heaven?"

Ray: "...It's Iowa...is there a heaven?"

John: "Oh yeah, it's the place where dreams come true."

This iconic line comes at the end of the famous 1980s movie *Field of Dreams*, a movie about Ray Kinsella, an Iowa farmer who is called to turn his cornfield into a baseball diamond, only to then have the ghosts of great players from the early 1900s come back and play ball. This story culminates in an encounter Ray has with the ghost of his father, John Kinsella, a frustrated baseball player with whom Ray had a strained relationship. As Ray was engaging with a younger version of his father, John was in awe of what he's experiencing at this special ballfield. As John was trying to make sense of this special environment, he asked Ray the famous question, "Is this heaven?" While there are obviously many theological issues in this Hollywood blockbuster, we can actually connect an aspect of the Christian hope to this encounter and see how the church plays the role of the sacred baseball diamond.

In the previous weeks, we've learned that the local church is the way God manifests His presence on earth, and so when the world experiences God's church, it experiences a small taste of heaven. This is why Paul wrote to the Corinthians to let them know that their (the local congregation's) bodies were collectively the temple of the Holy Spirit (**1 Cor. 3:16–17**). In the Old Testament period, God manifested His presence among His people in the holy of holies, when only the high priest had access to Him one



day a year. But now, beginning in the New Testament era, God's presence is present within all believers (**Ezek. 36:26–27**). This means that wherever the local church is gathered, the Temple of God is located. And this gives us a foretaste of the New Creation—the New Heavens and the New Earth—where God will perfectly dwell with all His people and among all of His creation.

In *Field of Dreams*, that special baseball field in Iowa was giving those men a glimpse of heaven—a chance to walk out of the cornfield as ghosts and play a real game on a beautifully manicured field, and to play ball the way it's supposed to be played—purely. They did return to the cornfield at the end of the day (and returned to their ghostly states), but for a few hours, those men were able to gather and engage in the thing that they longed for more than anything else. For a few wonderful hours each day, they experienced “heaven.”¹ In a much truer way, this is what the local church is able to offer the world: an experience of the New Heavens and the New Earth in which all things are made new, and where God is dwelling with His people in a way we've never experienced before. The local church gets to expose the world to the Kingdom of God.

¹Once again, we must overemphasize that what Hollywood is portraying here as “heaven” actually has zero point of contact to the biblical concept of heaven. We are merely making the connection that even in the secular Hollywood industry there's a longing to be connected to something greater than ourselves, and that experience is what the local church offers the world.

One of the best ways to see how the gospel affects the world is by looking at what we'll call **Redemptive-History**. This comes in 4-parts: *Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Re-creation*:

Part 1: Creation

In the beginning, God created the heavens and earth (and then everything else)...and once He created humankind, He looked at it all and declared that it was very good (**Gen. 1:31**). God created a special temple called the Garden, and then He placed Adam and Eve inside of it. Their job was to serve and protect the Garden-temple (**Gen. 2:15**). They had free rein (along with free reign) and could do anything with the exception of eating from one of the trees (**Gen. 2:16-17**).

Part 2: Fall

But *then...*Adam and Eve couldn't control themselves and did the *ONE* thing they weren't allowed. So, God expelled them from the Garden-temple (**Gen. 3:23**). They no longer shared in the special relationship they had with God. Death was real. Humankind now had a hatred towards God that was not originally part of our design. Things were bad, and we would not be able to (nor would we want to) be reconciled.

Part 3: Redemption

This is what God has done in Jesus. Because humans were unable to rescue themselves from their predicament, God had to provide the solution. By the faithful life, death, resurrection, and ascension of God's Messiah Jesus, God has redeemed the world to Himself. He has reconciled rebel sinners to Himself (**2 Cor. 5:18**). He has made Jesus King over all things (**Matt. 28:18**) and invites rebels to not only become citizens of this Kingdom but to co-reign with King Jesus (**2 Tim. 2:11-13**).

Part 4: Re-creation

This is what God will do. This is the great hope for which the world cries out (**Rom. 8:18-25**). This is what we read about in Revelation 21–22. While we have not yet experienced this in its fullness, there is an aspect of this that we do get to experience as the local church. Through the local church, we experience a foretaste of New Creation and provide hope and encouragement to one another. We do this by being “on mission.”

When we hear the word *mission* we oftentimes limit it to things like building houses on a weekend trip to Mexico, or other things that long-term “missionaries” do. For the majority of the local church, mission is something that we don’t feel is on our job description. This is why we need to expand our view of mission and let the Bible define it. One biblical scholar defines mission as “all that God is doing in his great purpose for the whole of creation and all that he calls us to do in cooperation with that purpose.² Mission involves all the activities that God’s people are able to engage and participate in. Mission is literally what the local church is called to do at all times—and that might never involve a weekend trip to Mexico.

The starting point of mission happens in the local church—specifically, our weekly gathering. It’s here in which the saints gather and sing praises to God. This corporate singing reminds us of the eternal worship in which we will present to God in the New Heavens (**Rev. 4–5**). It’s in the weekly gathering that we pray for one another, which reminds us that not only is our dependence upon God, but that God is active in hearing our petitions, and that one day He will be enthroned at the center of His creation, where we’ll have no more limited access to Him (**Rev. 21:3–4, 22–26**). And it is in the local church in which the word of God is proclaimed, reminding us of whose world we live in: the promise-making and promise-keeping God of Israel, who sent His Son to redeem it and reign over (and also with) it!

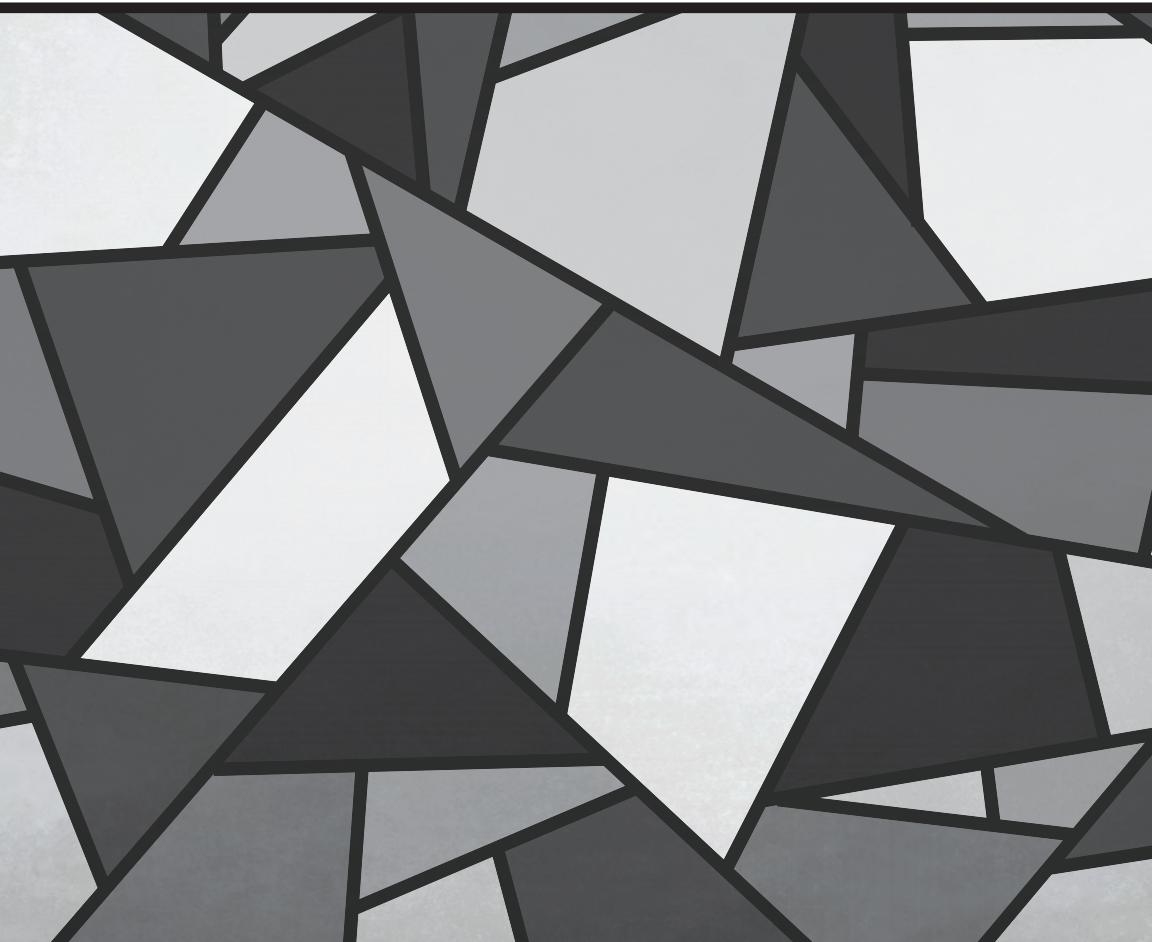
² Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God’s People: A Biblical Theology of the Church’s Mission* (Zondervan, 2010) p. 25

Review Questions

1. How does Paul describe the relationship between the Holy Spirit and the local church?
2. What roles does the local church play in allowing the present world to experience heaven?
3. Can you describe the 4 basic parts of “Redemptive History”?



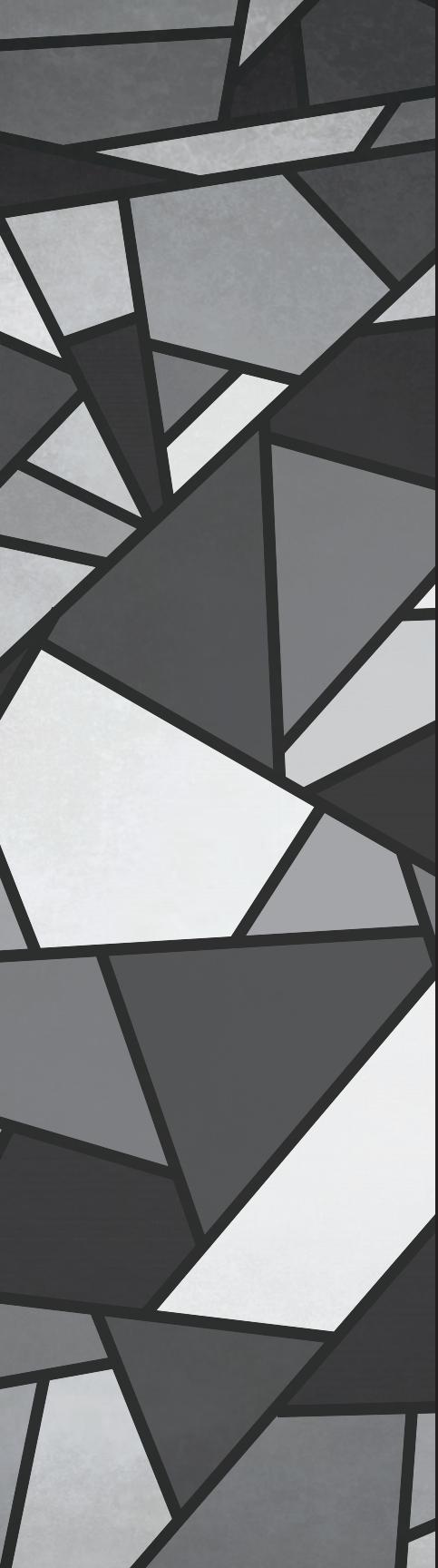
“Through the local church, we experience a foretaste of New Creation and provide hope and encouragement to one another.”



THE MODERN-LOCAL CHURCH

There will come a day when all God's people will have access to Him in a way they could have only dreamt about in this present age. There will come a day when we won't have physical pain or get up out of a chair without making a grunting noise. There will come a day when anxiety will not cripple us. There will come a day in which everything will be exactly as it is supposed to be—this is known as "righteousness." There will come a day when *mission* will be no more, as the purpose of the local church is no longer to reach the unbelieving world, because God will have reconciled all those that are His. However, there will never come a day in which worship ceases, in fact, it will only intensify.

On that day when God makes all things new, the Lamb—Jesus the Messiah—will be presented His Bride, the church. At that moment, a cosmic wedding ceremony will take place in which we will be united to Him in a way we have never experienced before. We will live in a perfect Garden-Temple that is the New Earth, yet it's also the New Heaven because it is the place in which God will dwell with His people in an unfiltered, unveiled, perfectly exposed, and transparent way. The New Earth will be perfectly filled with the glory of God, and all His people (the church) will experience life the way it was intended to be—perfect, with nothing unclean in existence.



This is our hope. This is what we strive for. This is what God has made available to us through Jesus. And when we gather together as a local congregation, we are reminding ourselves, as well as showing the world, what can be expected when God fully consecrates His Kingdom! When we gather as a church, we can ask ourselves, “Is this heaven?” and can reply, “No, it’s Brentwood...but this is a taste of what heaven is like!”

“**T**here will never come a day in which worship ceases, in fact, it will only intensify.”

Responding Questions

1. Personal Assessment: Is the book of Revelation something you read with joy? Do you see the beauty of it? Chapters 21–22 are obviously amazing, but what about all the encouraging words through the first 20 chapters?

What exhortations do the followers of Jesus receive?

How are we to overcome just as He did?

Would you read through the book again this week, but instead of trying to “decode” everything, just look for things like: What does Jesus the King do? What are His people called to do? What does worship look like (good worship or false worship)?

2. Group Conversation & Reflection: We live in a unique time in American-Christian history as Christian “sub-culture” has never been stronger. What are ways that this 12-week study has challenged the way you think about the local church?

What are things that you've assumed (or been taught) that might need to be re-thought?

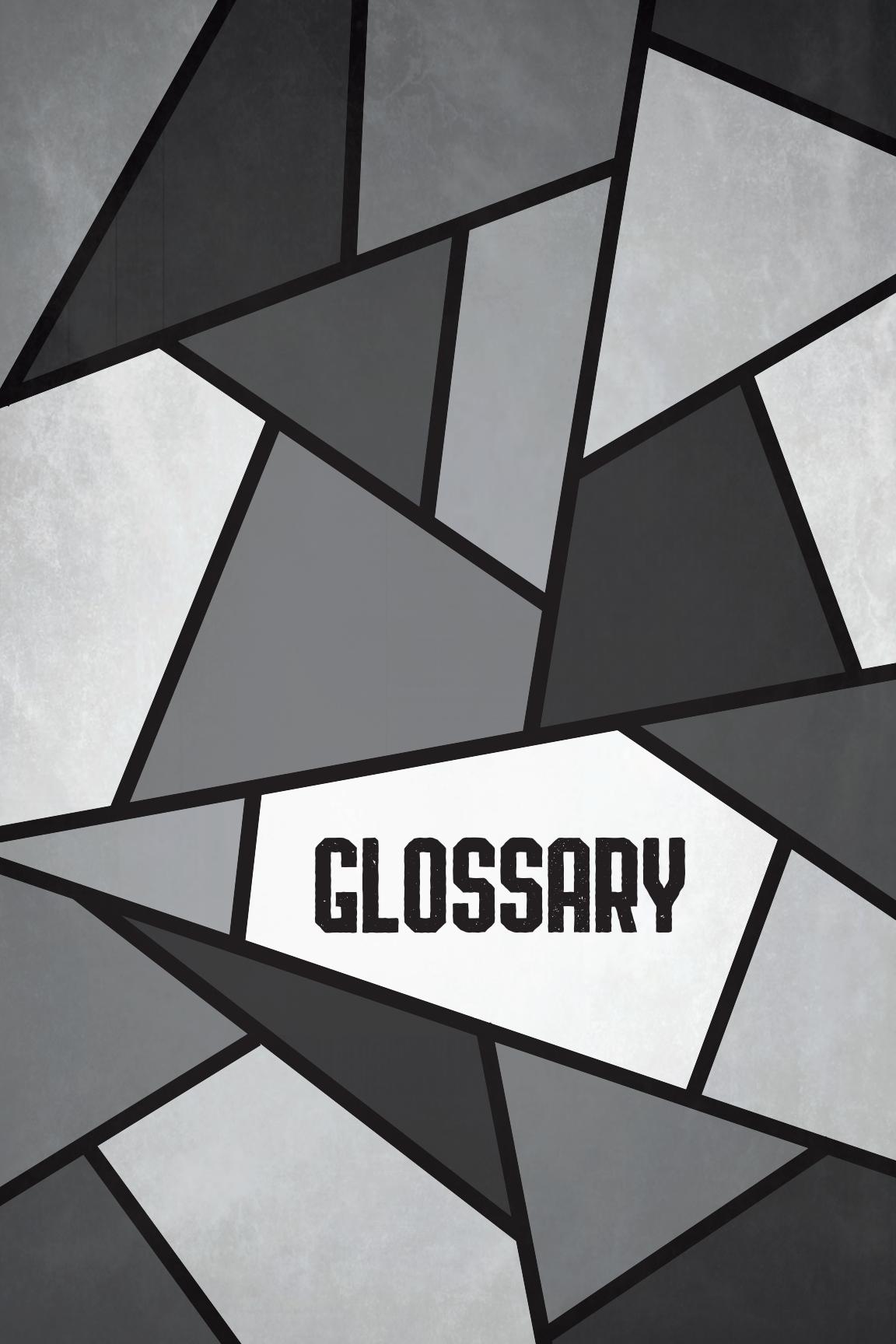
- 3. Action Steps:** If what we've discussed is true, and the gathered local church is a foretaste of heaven, both for church members among themselves and for the world (as we are a light), how should this affect our attitude towards how we live now, and how we gather now?

EXHORTATION

Church—Let us carry on in our faith. Let us conquer the evil of this present age as we anticipate the day when the Lord makes all things new. Let us gather as God's people, reflecting His love and image to the world, in the hopes that countless millions will see our light and turn to the true Light, that they would live in a New Heaven that has no need for light because the Father and Son serve as its power source.

NOTES

The Necessity of Church



GLOSSARY

Ambassadors: An official envoy; a diplomatic agent of the highest rank accredited to a foreign government or sovereign as the resident representative of his or her own government or sovereign. One appointed for a special and often temporary diplomatic assignment (See also *Embassies*).

Baptism: Is the initiation rite of the people of God into the covenant community (the church). In the New Covenant, the sign of inclusion is a circumcised heart by the Spirit, which is symbolized through baptism. It's a church's act of affirming and portraying a believer's union with Christ by immersing him or her in water, and a believer's act of publically committing him or herself to Christ and His people.

Church: From the Greek word *ekklesia*, meaning "gathering or assembly." This is the word used in the New Testament to describe what the people of God are and what they do; a body, organism, living stones, living temple.

Church (Invisible): The true church that consists of all true believers in Christ. It is the church that only God can see, chosen believers from all time and history. Those belonging to the invisible church are saved and sealed with and by the Holy Spirit.

Church (Visible): The community of followers that we see here on earth, most notably in our local churches. It is the expression of Christianity that we can see. Not everyone who attends church has a saving knowledge of Christ Jesus, therefore the visible church will contain unbelievers.

Communion: This is a sacrament that Jesus instructed His followers to partake in. It's an ongoing mark of discipleship that not only reminds the disciple of what Jesus has done, but is also something that provides spiritual grace for the local congregation, as we gather together and remember that we are filled by the Spirit, enjoying His presence, and look forward to the day in which God makes all things new.

Covenant: A chosen relationship in which two parties make binding promises to each other. The covenant concept is a central, unifying theme of Scripture, establishing and defining God's relationship to man in all ages.

Deacon: A formal church office within the local church. The word deacon comes from the Greek word denoting a table servant. Deacons are those people called by the local church to formally serve the body, especially in the areas that will free up the pastors/elders to minister the word.

Disciple: a believer who is following and learning to rightly reflect the image of Christ in and through their own life (**Gen. 1:27, Col. 3:10, 2 Cor. 3:18**).

Ecclesiology: Coming from the Greek word *ekklesia* (translated, church), ecclesiology is the systematic study of the church. A study on ecclesiology would include such topics as, church membership, baptism and communion, church leadership, etc.

Ekklesia: The Greek word used in the New Testament that is translated into English as “church.” In the NT, *ekklesia* always means “gathering or assembly” and does not refer to a physical structure or building.

Elder: See *pastor*

Embassies: The official residence, offices, or headquarters of an ambassador (see *Ambassador*).

Kingdom of God: The rule and reign of Christ over the people of God and all of the creation. In the first century, Jews expected that God’s Kingdom—the restoration of David’s throne—would be a political kingdom that would overcome Rome. The main focus of Jesus’ teachings in the Gospels focuses on the Kingdom of God (note: the terms Kingdom of God and Kingdom of Heaven are synonymous).

Liturgy (liturgical): There is not a prescribed form of public worship pattern that is set for every church in Scripture. Simply put, liturgy is the pattern and format of how a worship service is run that includes observing the ordinances, fellowship, observance of doctrine, prayer, and praise that is centered on Scripture.

New Covenant: The culmination of how God was building His kingdom through covenants. The New Covenant was foretold through the Old Testament, with many people, places, and things foreshadowing and pointing to Jesus. In the New Covenant, God will circumcise the hearts of all believers, will write His law upon their hearts, and will give them His Spirit. By this, the people of God will truly be able to live out God’s law. The sign of the New Covenant is a circumcised heart (and is outwardly observed by baptism and communion).

Passover: (*Pesach* in Hebrew) is an especially holy event for the Jewish people. It commemorates the time when God spared them from the plague of the death of their firstborn and brought them out of slavery in Egypt (Exod. 11:1–13:16).

Pastor: One of the two official offices held within the local church. The New Testament seems to identify the title pastor, elder, and overseer as the same position. Therefore, the pastor and elder serve in the same role (teaching and guarding true doctrine), and have the same moralistic character traits (see 1 Tim. 3 and Titus 1).

Priesthood of all Believers: The belief that all Christians have direct access to and communion with God as a result of Christ's atonement. This allows all believers to approach God the Father, in Jesus, by the Spirit, with confidence: offering praise, seeking forgiveness, and doing good in His name. The Reformers emphasized this principle in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church's teaching and practice of priests functioning as intermediaries between God and the congregation. While upholding the unique role of ordained clergy, the Reformed tradition views the church as a body of priests in equal relationship with God and representing God to the world.

Redemptive-History: The four-part story of how God is redeeming the world for His glory. Part 1—*Creation*: God made all things, and they were the way they are supposed to be. Part 2—*Fall*: Humans rebelled against God and are separated from Him. Part 3—*Redemption*: Because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, He was able to redeem the fallen world and reconcile all things to the Father. Part 4—*Re-Creation*: God is recreating the world to be perfect, the way He intended it from the beginning. He does this through Jesus, who will complete and consummate all things to their full glory at His second coming, where He judges the world and makes all things “as they ought to be.”

Sacrament: Baptism and Communion. These are physical, visual aids to help us better understand and appreciate what Jesus Christ accomplished for us in His redemptive work, they are testimonies that we indeed believe in Christ. Sacraments are determined by three factors: they were instituted by Christ, they were taught by the apostles, and they were practiced by the early church.

APPENDIX

WHY WAS JESUS BAPTIZED?

It's pretty clear from the Bible that Jesus demands, and the early church practices, baptism for those who are following God's Messiah. And even when Protestant groups like Presbyterians and Baptists disagree on who should be baptized (our Presbyterian brothers and sisters practice infant baptism, whereas we believe that one should only be baptized after being able to make a public profession of faith), we both agree that baptism is important. Baptism is the thing that marks off God's people and identifies us with the death and resurrection of Jesus. But if baptism is something that is pointing to our recognition of sin, repentance to God, and our faith in Jesus, then we need to ask one important question: *if baptism is for sinners, why was Jesus baptized?* We'll give you the quick answer now: He was baptized to repent on behalf of the people of Israel in order to fulfill the righteousness that God demands of His people.

When asked this question (why was Jesus baptized?) a very common answer is, "He was baptized to set an example for us." On the surface, this sounds correct but is probably not likely. For example, nowhere in the New Testament does the early church (whether in the book of Acts, with the Apostles, or in any of Paul's writings) describe baptism as something that we are to do because Jesus did. However, Matthew's Gospel probably provides the clearest example of why Jesus had to be baptized:

13 Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. 14 John would have prevented him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?" 15 But Jesus answered him, "Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness." Then he consented (Matt. 3:13-17).

John was baptizing people "for repentance," and this is the baptism that Jesus

participated in: Jesus was baptized to “*fulfill all righteousness*” (3:15). But if Jesus was perfect, why would he need to be baptized for repentance, and what righteousness was He fulfilling? Here it is—He was repenting on behalf of the people of Israel in order for God to remove them from exile. Jesus’ baptism was very connected to the Old Testament story of Israel, and how they had been unable to be righteous.

The Old Testament Background

The last book of the Old Testament is Malachi, right? Well, in the Christian Bible, yes. But in the Jewish Bible, it’s not. The Jewish Bible has a different order and puts 2 Chronicles at the end (the Jewish Bible actually doesn’t split it up into 1st and 2nd, and has it as one, big long book). Do you remember what is happening at the end of 2 Chronicles? It is telling of Judah being cast into exile (Babylon) for disobeying God’s covenant—with the consequence of a destroyed temple in Jerusalem, death to many Jewish people, and a 70-year captivity for Judah (36:17–21). Then we hear of the exiles being released to return to their land and build a temple. This occurred around 539–535 BC. The exiles return to Judah, seemingly released from the consequence of exile. However, a major issue remained—for the majority of the next 500 years, even into the life of Jesus, Judah was occupied by foreign kingdoms (including the Persians, Greeks, and Romans).

The New Testament and the Messianic Expectation

By the time of Jesus in the first century, the Jewish people constantly asked the question, “if Yahweh is our King, and since He has released us from exile, why are we still occupied by foreign, pagan, kingdoms?” In their mind, God hadn’t fully accepted the repentance of the people from their past sins. And so, there was a strong restoration movement to repent and look for God’s long-awaited messiah, who would usher in the day of the Lord, defeat God’s enemies, give Judah sovereign control of their nation, and once again stand as a super-power, just like in the day’s of kings Saul, Solomon, and David. This is why John the Baptist was offering a baptism for forgiveness: not for the people to have a conversion experience and “ask Jesus into their hearts” (as Jesus had not yet inaugurated His kingdom), but to corporately repent on behalf of the nation, for God to release them from exile.

Jesus Completes Righteousness for the People of God

Once it was time for Jesus' public ministry, He responded to John's call for repentance, not for His own sins, but on behalf of the nation—Jesus engaged in a corporate baptism, to *fulfill all righteousness* that God required of His people. Because, after all, Jesus is the perfect representative of God's people, which is why He serves as the perfect prophet, priest, and king and is the perfect mediator between God and humankind.

This is why Mark begins his Gospel the way he does. In 1:2–3, the first words Mark pens is a quote from Isaiah the prophet (*“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way, the voice of one crying in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight”*). To set the context of what God is doing in Jesus, Mark has to tie Jesus to the Old Testament story of exile (from Isaiah), where God promised to one day come and release His covenant people from bondage. In 1:4–8, we read about John the Baptist, the messenger who will prepare the way for the Lord. In 1:9–13, we then see Jesus' baptism, which prompted a response from heaven that no one expected, *“And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased”* (1:11). This launches Jesus' public ministry. He is the God from Isaiah 40:3 who has come to comfort God's people. He is Immanuel, God with us (Matt. 1:23; Isaiah 7:14), who has rescued His people from exile, and who will now establish His Kingdom on earth, as God's Messiah sitting on the throne.

This is the reason why Jesus was baptized. It was not to set an example for us but was to fulfill the righteousness that God's people were not previously able to fulfill. And because Jesus was able to fulfill all righteousness and satisfy God's demands, which allowed Him to sit on God's throne and rule with God, we too can become heirs to this royal Kingdom if we believe in Him. *“For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith....There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise”* (Gal. 3:26, 28–29).

VIEWS ON COMMUNION

Throughout Christian history, the church has agreed that communion (also known as the Lord's Supper or the Eucharist) is important and something Jesus commanded us to practice. However, there have been differing views of what Communion represents and what it accomplishes. While there is a lot more to this conversation than we can present here, we thought it would be helpful to identify a few ways in which Communion is understood by Christian Protestant denominations, and especially how it differs from how the Roman Catholic Church practices it.

I. The Roman Catholic Church: Transubstantiation

The Roman Catholic Church places a special emphasis on communion, making it the centerpiece of the Mass (their regular gathering). The official teaching of the Catholic Church is that it is the “source and summit of the Christian life” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1324). If you’ve ever participated in a Catholic service, you might remember that they call this practice the “*eucharist*,” which is actually the Greek word that means “thanksgiving.” They believe that the eucharistic elements (the bread and wine) are the very sacrifice of the body and blood of Jesus. While there is an aspect of remembering the sacrifice of Jesus, the main thrust of the Catholic practice is to re-present the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross. So how is the eucharist a re-presenting of the one-time sacrifice of Jesus? Through the *transubstantiation* of the bread and wine.

Prior to the start of the communion portion of the Catholic service, the substance of the bread and wine are simply bread and wine. However, as the priest raises the bread and cup and calls upon the Holy Spirit, the priest (who serves as the represented Christ to the congregation) engages in the act of consecration. During this act, the *substance* of the bread and wine are *trans-*

formed into Christ's body and blood: this is known as *transubstantiation* (the transformation of the substance). While the appearance of the bread and wine doesn't change (i.e., it tastes, feels, and smells the same as it did before), the elements are transformed into the real presence of Christ. Since the elements are now transformed into the real presence of Christ, this can be a sacrifice that is offered to God, which is the same sacrifice as what Christ offered on the cross. It is necessary for the Catholic to partake in the eucharist (weekly), as this is one means of grace that saves them.

The Roman Catholic view is very different from other Protestant practices of communion, which is why the early Reformers challenged it, as we will see next.

Note: We must emphasize that we are trying to represent the Roman Catholic perspective on communion accurately (hopefully we've done so). As a congregation that is firmly steeped in the Reformed tradition, GHCC would reject the Roman Catholic understanding of communion. However, it's important to attempt to understand differing perspectives accurately and provide as much charity as possible.

2. Martin Luther: *Consubstantiation*

Martin Luther, one of the most identifiable icons of the Protestant Reformation, couldn't accept the Catholic view of communion as being a re-sacrifice of the death of Jesus. Luther rejected the idea that the elements (the bread and wine) literally become the body and blood of Jesus (*transubstantiation*). However, as someone who had a high view of the deity of Jesus, Luther felt that there was something special about the elements and that the bread and wine were not merely bread and wine. Luther developed a different view from the Catholic Church, which is known as *consubstantiation* (con: Latin for with).

Rather than the substance being transformed (*transubstantiation*) into the body and blood of Christ, he believed that the substance stayed the same, but that since Jesus was God, and since God is omnipresent (all places at all times), then Jesus is certainly *in, with, on, around, beside, etc.* the elements (i.e., look at a chart that lists prepositions, and you'll see Luther's view). For Luther, the *substance* of the elements had Christ perfectly *with* it. Luther does NOT claim that Jesus IS the object itself (like the Catholics do), but it's more like a sponge that has fully absorbed water: the water isn't the sponge, and the sponge isn't the water, but wherever the sponge is, there too is the water.

3. Ulrich Zwingli: The Memorial View

Ulrich Zwingli was also part of the Protestant Reformation. A Swiss priest who largely served in Zurich, he was also a Roman Catholic who was bold enough to encourage reform within the Roman Catholic Church. His view of communion was extremely simple and practical. Zwingli would argue that we are to observe communion as a memorial—we do this “in remembrance of Jesus” just as Jesus commanded in Matthew 26:26. The communion elements are literally only bread and wine, containing no physical presence of Jesus, and no spiritual grace. The purpose of communion is to remember what Christ has accomplished on the cross; therefore, it is a memorial. This particular view has become more popular in America over the last century but has not been the dominant practice among Christians since the Reformation.

4. John Calvin: The Spiritual Presence View

Fellow Reformer John Calvin also had a specific view of Communion that differed from the above three practices. Calvin presented what we might call the “spiritual presence” view. Calvin took seriously Zwingli’s teaching that Jesus had commanded a “memorial” type of observation of Communion, and so there is a sense in which Communion is a type of memorial or symbol. However, while the elements are a symbol that exhibits what Christ did, it’s not an empty symbol.

The spiritual presence view also affirms that the true presence of Christ is spiritually present during this shared meal and that it provides a real means of grace for the Christian congregation. This is not a saving grace, in the way the Catholic Church teaches, but a grace that Christ gives to grow the church in our sanctification. Since the Lord’s body was once for all sacrifice for us, we may feed on it, and therefore, Christ Himself is spiritually present. When we do this as a congregation we are not merely remembering our sin and how Jesus paid the debt for that sin, but we are also remembering how Jesus promised to never leave His people. This meal reminds us to anticipate the day in which His kingdom will be fully consummated, and God’s people will have a complete and perfect communion with God, not separated by the chains of this fallen world.

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