

The Church

Fight The Urge To Fit In (part 8)

Summary: We believe that the Church was instituted by Jesus Christ to be the people of God and is made up of all true believers regardless of race, gender, age or station in life; the Church visible is the local congregation of believers.

Scripture: Romans 12:1–2; Matthew 16:13–19

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A Tale of Two Churches

In other news this week, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis sent two plane loads of immigrants to Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, a north-eastern island in the US. The planes arrived on 14 September, ostensibly to protest a rise in illegal immigration under President Joe Biden, in an effort to "beat the left".

The immigrants were basically 'dumped' on the tarmac without any warning for local community services.¹ The stunt was made worse by reporting from the Venezuelan and Colombian immigrants themselves, who were led to believe they were being taken to Boston, where they would receive work permits and English language lessons.

It is true immigration laws in the US are just as outdated, and fall just as short, as those in Australia. Yet, as recently as 2018, President Donald Trump negotiated a deal to introduce reforms, which were blocked by 14 senators from Trump's own Republican party, some of whom were known and outspoken Christians.

Florida governor DeSantis, an avowed Christian himself, was among the group opposing the reform and yet he is now complaining about an increase in illegal immigration.

In contrast to this poor representation of the Church, local residents responded differently. According to *Religion News* reporter Jonathan Merritt:

When DeSantis' planes unexpectedly dropped off 50 helpless migrants in Martha's Vineyard, a town of only 20,000 with no immigrant housing or services to speak of, a local parish stepped in to help.

The Rev. Vincent Seadale of St. Andrews Episcopal Church, which houses homeless people during the winter months, was at a conference in North Carolina on Wednesday when a parishioner called to inform him of the situation. Seadale gave permission for his parishioners to offer the migrants food, a place to sleep and a play area for the children. Volunteers kept vigil overnight in case any unexpected needs arose.

There is no doubt who acted with more Christian integrity in this situation. And acting with integrity to Christian values and compliance to God's mission is the express purpose of the Church.

God's Eternal Purpose

To understand what is the Church, we need to grapple with God's eternal purpose in creation.

God's Purpose Revealed in Humankind Generally

Remember, the creator God is perfect and complete. Triune in nature, the Almighty has need of nothing and no one beyond the communion he already enjoys. Yet God created because he wants to share the love enjoyed by the Trinity with others.

This grace was given to me —the least of all the saints— to proclaim to the Gentiles the incalculable riches of Christ, and to shed light for all about the administration of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things. This is so that God's multi-faceted wisdom may now be made known through the church to the rulers and authorities in the heavens. This is according to his eternal purpose accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord. In him we have boldness and confident access through faith in him. (Ephesians 3:8–12)²

The eternal purpose of God has always been to be known and he therefore determined to make himself and his wisdom known to a people. This was accomplished finally by Christ Jesus and then through the Church, but let's not get ahead of ourselves.

For now, let us cherish the fact the Lord God created and it was very good indeed (Gen 1:31).

It really is important to note, though, God created humankind for a purpose: to fill and subdue the Earth:

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness. They will rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the livestock, the whole earth, and the creatures that crawl on the earth." ... God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it. Rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and every creature that crawls on the earth." (Genesis 1:26–28)

The Lord God himself tamed the chaos but then invited humankind to cultivate it, to partner with him to make this earth a human dwelling place, to the glory of God and the benefit of all humankind (Gen 1:2ff). All he asked of them was their faithfulness, demonstrated simply by not eating of one particular tree in the Garden (Gen 2:15-17). How hard could that be?

Sadly, in the Fall, we forsook our partnership, choosing instead to go our own way. We were then kicked out of the Garden into the wilderness, where filling the earth would come with intense pain in labour and dysfunctional relationships, and subduing the earth would come only by painful toil and the sweat of our brow (Gen 3:16,17-19).

God's Purpose Revealed in One Family Specifically

If not through humankind generally, the next big stage in the fulfilling of God's eternal purpose was calling Abraham and Sarah. Perhaps through one family God's eternal purpose could be fulfilled?

I will make you into a great nation, I will bless you, I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing ... all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (Genesis 12:2–3)

God chose one family, yet there is more to this covenant:

Abraham is to become a great and powerful nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him so that he will command his children and his house after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just. This is how the LORD will fulfill to Abraham what he promised him.” (Genesis 18:18–19)

The family and descendants of Abraham and Sarah would become a great nation—that was the promise of God—yet the nations would be blessed through them only if they kept the way of the Lord by doing what is right and just. This faithfulness was in contrast to the people of Sodom and Gomorrah whose sin was “extremely serious” (Gen 18:20).

Therefore, the call on the family of Abraham and Sarah was to faithfulness and for a purpose, just like with humankind through Adam and Eve.

Each generation of the family and descendants of Abraham and Sarah was called upon to renew this covenant between God and their people:

“Look, today I set before you a blessing and a curse: there will be a blessing, if you obey the commands of the LORD your God I am giving you today, and a curse, if you do not obey the commands of the LORD your God and you turn aside from the path I command you today by following other gods you have not known. (Deuteronomy 11:26–28)

Even a cursory reading of the Old Testament (OT) will reveal the family and descendants of Abraham and Sarah could not even do that, did not maintain their faithfulness, and so did not fulfil their purpose.

God's Purpose Revealed in the Church

Following the work of Jesus accomplished in his birth, life, teaching, miracles, death, resurrection and ascension, the next step was to call the Church:

He has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began. (2 Timothy 1:9)

God's purpose is revealed in and through the Church. I will speak more on this in a few moments.

God's Purpose Revealed on the Last Day

In the meantime, being the Church's time, God continues to reveal himself in the world and call the lost into his family, to fulfil his eternal purpose. That purpose will be gloriously revealed on the Last Day:

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. I also saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband. Then I heard a loud voice from the throne: Look, God's dwelling is with humanity, and he will live with them. They will be his

peoples, and God himself will be with them and will be their God.
(Revelation 21:1–3)

God's eternal purpose will be fulfilled! Make no mistake about it. How he moves human history toward that end has been clear all along. If not through humankind generally and not through one family specifically, then the time of the Church will take us toward its final and complete fulfilment —more on this next week.

What Is Essential About the Church?

The Church Was Instituted by Jesus Christ

Understanding God's eternal purpose then provides the background to this eighth part of our *Fight The Urge To Fit In* sermon series, which draws our attention to a statement on what is essential to believe about the Church:

We believe that the Church was instituted by Jesus Christ to be the people of God and is made up of all true believers regardless of race, gender, age or station in life; the Church visible is the local congregation of believers.

There are three things this statement teaches us about the Church, but we really need to remember that, as important as each individual is, God has something much larger in mind. All of God's ways move toward the end of establishing the people of God, who he has called out from the world to be set aside as his.³

The doctrine of the Church then can deliver us from individualism, from the idea that Christianity can all somehow be reduced or concentrated to fit into my experience, my personal relationship with God. Anyone who thinks rationally about God (i.e., “does theology”) is doing so in the Church, has learned doctrine from the Church, and is participating in the life of God's people. He or she is not some kind of a free agent who's off in a corner by themselves figuring out what they want to believe.

It is as Haddon Robinson preached:

You can have a personal faith; but you do not have an individual faith. You cannot be a Christian alone.

The word “saint” is never used in the singular in the NT. (Haddon Robinson)⁴

The first of the three things this statement teaches us is **the Church was instituted by Jesus Christ**.

The Church is the people who have responded to the revelation of God, and are then united by their faith in Christ and common life in him.

“But you,” he asked them, “who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus responded, “Blessed are you, Simon ... and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.” (Matthew 16:15–18)

Just as we gather in clubs and on projects with people who share common interests with us, the Church is those gathered around a shared faith and commitment to a Christian lifestyle.

Perhaps “instituted by” is not really the best term to use then. We almost should not need to be told how important it is to gather together; it is natural; it is instinctive. When a person withdraws from the Church, it is because they have been hurt by humans in such a way their faith in Christ Jesus is shattered. This should not happen, nor is it necessary to withdraw completely.

It is our faith in Christ Jesus that unites us and draws us together, not our faith in each other. This is how the Church is built: the Holy Spirit draws the people of God together. The people of the new covenant (Jer 31:31; Heb 8:7-13), the ones on whom the Holy Spirit has been poured out liberally (Ac 2:17-21) and who, therefore, worship in Spirit and in Truth (Jn 4:23-24), they are united *in Christ* as much as *by Christ*.

He is before all things, and by him all things hold together. He is also the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. (Colossians 1:17–18)

To say the Church is instituted by Jesus Christ also alludes to the fact he remains the authority in the Church. Everything that is done among and by the Church is both *for the glory of Christ* and *under the authority of Christ Jesus*. Our faith and lifestyle is no mere abstract ideal. Christians feel and know Christ is with us, encouraging and equipping us,

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us to do. (Ephesians 2:10)

And that means *each of us* are born again for good works, for in the Church there is no real hierarchy. We are all under the authority of Christ Jesus and all are merely striving to better reflect his glory, for as it is written,

And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God’s Son, growing into maturity with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness. Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit. But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into him who is the head —Christ. From him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building itself up in love by the proper working of each individual part. (Ephesians 4:11–16)

While we each might hold different positions in the Church, fulfilling different purposes, having different gifts and skills and resources to offer, we are all striving together “to know Christ and to make him better known”. And everything we each do is needed for others to do what they do, and we will only mature in our faith and lifestyle as we teach and learn and practise together.

This is a trustworthy saying: we will learn, love, worship and serve better together.

The Church Has No Distinctions or Limitations

This points leads to the next thing our statement teaches us: **the Church has no distinctions or limitations.**

Neither race, gender, age or station in life matter in the Church. The only concern is whether we are true believers or not, and it is the job of each of us to make sure we are all disciples of Christ Jesus and maturing as such.

When my wife and I travelled through India, we visited a local Salvation Army church on a Sunday. When the greeters found out I was a Youth Pastor, they invited me to share my testimony in the meeting. We were overwhelmed by their welcome and the exuberance of their faith. We felt united with them by faith, if not by language and culture.

We could have separated ourselves for all sorts of reasons: our light skin compared to their dark skin; our relative wealth compared to their poverty; our education compared to their lack thereof; my position as a minister; and so on. Yet it was such a joy to let them minister to us with their faith and generosity. We were united by faith if by nothing else.

In contrast to this unity, there are biblical examples of disunity:

My brothers and sisters, do not show favouritism as you hold on to the faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ. For if someone comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and a poor person dressed in filthy clothes also comes in, if you look with favour on the one wearing the fine clothes and say, "Sit here in a good place," and yet you say to the poor person, "Stand over there," or "Sit here on the floor by my footstool," haven't you made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (James 2:1-4)

It is a natural tendency of human nature to treat wealth and celebrity with favour, as if such persons are somehow better than others because of their privilege and resources.

It should not be so among God's people!

In those days, as the disciples were increasing in number, there arose a complaint by the Hellenistic Jews against the Hebraic Jews that their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution. (Acts 6:1)

Here we have a case in the early Church of racism among the believers, with food not being distributed equitably nor fairly.

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned. For he regularly ate with the Gentiles before certain men came from James. However, when they came, he withdrew and separated himself, because he feared those from the circumcision party. (Galatians 2:11-12)

In this story, the apostle Peter was visiting the Christians at Antioch. At first he sat willingly with the Gentile Christians, but when Jewish Christians showed up, he sidled up to them. Not so much because of racism, but because of theological differences and power imbalances.

The apostle Paul called him out for this hypocrisy.

While there will always be distinctions between people, that will cause us to limit some and favour others, in the Church we treat each other as if there are none, for as it is written,

There is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female; since you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:28)⁵

We are united by our one Lord, one hope, one faith, one baptism (Eph 4:4-6). We were all given the same Spirit to drink (1 Cor 12:12-14). We each have something to give; let us bring it gladly, for the edification of all.

A Local Church Is Part of the Universal Church

That leaves the final essential to know: **a local church is part of the universal Church.**

It really should go without saying, but so many Christians get this wrong, in their enthusiasm for their own congregation or the distinctives of their denomination.

Every local congregation is a microcosm of the Church that exists in all times, in all places, among all people. Yet it is not *merely* a microcosm. Every local congregation is THE Church visible in that time and place.

We are God's family here at Narellan Supa Centre, fulfilling God's eternal purpose by placing our faith in Jesus and living a Christian lifestyle *with integrity*. But so too is The Salvation Army congregation down at the corner, as well as the Baptist and Pentecostal congregations further in on Exchange Parade. We may not fellowship much with each other, but that does not mean we are not responsible to each other to represent the Church to the best of our ability to allow the Holy Spirit to encourage and empower us for the mission and ministry to which God has called us.

A great example of this is found in the writings of the apostle Paul. The story goes,

One of them, named Agabus, stood up and predicted by the Spirit that there would be a severe famine throughout the Roman world. This took place during the reign of Claudius. Each of the disciples, according to his ability, determined to send relief to the brothers and sisters who lived in Judea. They did this, sending it to the elders by means of Barnabas and Saul. (Acts 11:28-30)

Paul's missionary journeys included collecting money for the poor and challenged communities of believers in Jerusalem. He wrote about this collection in *Romans*, *1st* and *2nd Corinthians*, and *Philippians*.

Paul argued the needs of believers in one place were the concern of believers in other places. The apostle encouraged his communities to see themselves as belonging to a worldwide community, the people of God, the Church.

When one local church suffers, the whole Church suffers; when one embarrasses the faith, all of us are embarrassed. When one gains a victory, all the saints rejoice.

Conclusion

Let us pray for and encourage each other, wherever the people of God find themselves. Let us share our gifts and skills, wisdom and resources with other believers and other congregations, so that the whole Church is built up.

Let us remember Christ Jesus is the foundation upon which our church and the whole Church is built. We will remain faithful and fulfill his purpose for us.

Endnotes

- 1 Jonathan Merritt, “Southern Governors Sending Migrants North Face a Crisis of Faith”, 16-Sept-2022, <https://replug.link/d2858380> (accessed 22-Sept-2022).
- 2 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 3 Fred Sanders, “The Doctrine of the Church,” in *Lexham Survey of Theology*, ed. Mark Ward et al. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018).
- 4 “Lessons from Agur (Proverbs 30:24-28)”, *DTS Commencement Speech*, May-2002, <https://replug.link/f5373910> (accessed 24-Sept-2022).
- 5 See also Jn 10:16; Ac 10:28-29,47; 15:8-9; Eph 2:14-16; 3:6; Col 3:11. The great divide threatening the first Christians was between Jew and Gentile, but the Church was able to unite the two into one body in Christ.