

Lesson 5 – What is the Church?

“And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, ‘All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.’” - Matthew 28:18-20

“He gave some as apostles, some as prophets, some as evangelists, some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.” – Eph. 4:11-13

What is the church?

Often times when people think of “church” they think of either a building or a Sunday morning event. This notion could not be further from the truth. The church is a community of people who believe in the person and work of Jesus Christ. They are the family of God who has been forgiven of their sin, reconciled to their Creator, and sealed with the Holy Spirit into the New Covenant (Jn. 1:12; 2 Cor. 5:16-20; Eph. 1:13-14; Heb. 10:14-18, 12:22-24). The church consists of people who believe in Jesus Christ regardless of their ethnicity, skin color, language, gender, economic situations, or political affiliations (Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11-22).

Believers in Jesus were first called “Christians” at Antioch (Acts 11:26) because of their faithfulness to Jesus, who is the Christ. To be a Christian simply means that you are a follower of the Christ. The Christ (or Messiah) is God’s “anointed one” promised to the nation of Israel through whom God promised to save the world (Gen. 12:1-3). Jews and Gentiles (non-Jews) who receive Jesus as their Lord and Savior are brought together in the church to enjoy the blessings of Israel without any human distinction (Rom. 11; Eph. 2:11-22; Gal 3:28).

In every gathering of believers, there are people present who are not Christians (Matt.13:24–30), possibly including wolves sent by Satan to lead people astray (Acts 20:29–30; Jude 4). While it is possible for Christians to know who else is a believer through their testimony concerning Jesus and love for the brethren, ultimately only the Lord knows exactly every person who is and is not a Christian (2 Tim. 2:19).

What is the purpose of the church?

The purpose of the church is not found in building buildings, having bake sales, pushing political agendas, or making people feel comfortable on Sunday morning. The purpose of the church is primarily to bring glory and pleasure to Jesus Christ and God the Father (Matt. 5:16; 1 Cor. 6:20; 2 Thess. 1:11-12; Heb. 13:20-21; 1 Pt. 4:11). Everything the church does should be captured under the umbrella of **knowing Christ** (being saved by Him, learning about Him, walking with Him) and **making Him known** (proclaiming Him to others through words and service).

Graham Bible Church's work to achieve this goal can be understood in two broad categories: building up (discipleship) and reaching out (evangelism).

It is easy for churches to focus only on one aspect of this calling while neglecting the other. Some churches create environments that are powerful for reaching out to lost people but neglect faithful believers and hinder them from growing in spiritual maturity. Other churches create environments with many opportunities to learn about the Bible but quickly become stagnant because they lack the passion of seeing lost people come to know Jesus. Both of these extremes are dangerous and as a church that desires to be healthy, we must ensure that we keep a healthy balance of building up and reaching out.

In striving to keep this balance, it is important to remember that the church should build itself up in order to reach out. Then, in reaching out, it sets the stage to further build itself up with new believers who need to be taught how to walk in the Lord.

Within these broad categories, there are several different activities which contribute to the church's goals. Many of these activities can be seen in the account of the church's beginning in **Acts 2:41-50**. Following the account of Peter's calling the people of Israel to repent and believe in the risen Lord Jesus, Luke records the activities of the Jerusalem church:

"41 So then, those who had received his word were **baptized**; and that day there were added about three thousand souls. 42 They were continually **devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching** and to **fellowship**, to the **breaking of bread** and to **prayer**. 43 Everyone kept feeling a **sense of awe**; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. 44 And all those who had believed were together and **had all things in common**; 45 and they began selling their property and possessions and were **sharing them with all**, as anyone might have need. 46 Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were **taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart**, 47 **praising God** and **having favor with all the people**. **And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.**" – Acts 2:41-50

Building Up

The church is to be a community that helps disciples of Christ grow in spiritual maturity, holiness, and perseverance. This desire for the church to grow reflects the heart of Jesus who said, "I will build my church"

(Matt. 16:18). At GBC we seek to promote spiritual growth by gathering together on Sunday mornings for corporate worship but also in smaller groups throughout the week.

Celebrating the Sacraments – “were baptized...breaking of bread”

Before His departure, Jesus instituted two sacraments (ceremonial practices) for His followers to observe: baptism and communion. Baptism is celebrated once by each believer as the sign of entering into the New Covenant, and communion is celebrated on a regular basis by the community of believers to remind them of the death, resurrection, and return of Jesus.

Baptism should be done for anyone who demonstrates saving faith (Acts 2:41; 8:12; 10:47-48 to show that they are united through faith with Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (Rom. 6:1-7; Col. 2:11-12).

Baptism does not save anyone, but instead is an external symbol of an inward reality (Gal. 1:10, 5:4; Eph. 2:8-9; 1 Pt. 3:21). Baptism should be done in the name of the Trinity (Matt. 28:19) and is commanded for all God’s people as an act of obedience (Matt. 28:19; Acts 2:38).¹

Communion was instituted by Jesus at the Last Supper as a means by which God’s people could continually remember and celebrate His body (the bread) and His blood (the wine) which was shed for the forgiveness of sins (Matt. 26:26-29). The celebration of communion should be a time of repentance from sin, remembrance of Jesus’ death and resurrection, and joyful anticipation of His return (1 Cor. 11:17-34). It is also a time for the church family to demonstrate their unity in Christ. In light of this, communion is only intended for Christians (1 Cor. 11:29-30). The church’s elders determine the frequency in which a community celebrates communion, but Christian families are free to celebrate together anytime believers are gathered. The final communion for God’s people will be at the Wedding Supper of the Lamb at the end of history with Jesus in His Kingdom (Rev.19:9).

Bible Teaching – “devoting themselves to the apostle’s teaching”

Understanding God’s Word is essential to living as a mature child of God. Teaching was one of Jesus’ primary ministries on earth (Matt. 4:23, 7:28-29, 9:35, 22:16; Mk. 4:2, 6:43, 9:31) and was an expectation in the early church (Matt. 28:20; Acts. 2:42; 5:42; Col. 1:28, 3:16; 1 Tim. 3:2, 4:13-16; 2 Tim. 2:2, 24, 3:16; Titus 3:2; Heb. 5:12). The Apostle’s teaching would have been focused primarily on showing how the OT hope was fulfilled in Jesus Christ (Acts. 2:14-36, 3:11-26, 7:1-53, 8:25-40, 13:13-41, 17:22-31, 28:23). A healthy church must hold the Word of God as its guiding authority and seek to apply it out of love for their Savior (Jn. 14:15, 21, 15:10; 1 Jn. 5:3; 2 Jn 6).

Community – “fellowship...all things in common...sharing...meals together”

The church is to be a community of people who love each other, sacrifice for each other, and encourage each other. The community of believers should be a safe place where we can openly discuss our hopes, fears, doubts, and expectations about life and God. The church should model its sacrificial love (Jn. 15:13) and

¹ We believe baptism by immersion is the method that best reflects the theological meaning behind baptism (Mark 1:5; 1:10; John 3:23; Rom. 6:1-11). See Appendix 2 for more information on GBC’s view of baptism.

forgiveness (Matt. 18:21-35; 2 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13) after the humble example of Jesus (Philp. 2:3-11). A study of the “one another” passages of the NT provides a solid foundation for understanding how God calls us to live alongside one another.²

Dependence Upon God – “devoting themselves... to prayer”

The church must be committed to trusting in, drawing from, and listening closely to God. Prayer, fasting, and other forms of humble dependence upon God keep the church in its proper place of needing God’s daily sustenance. Prayerfulness, or lack thereof, is a powerful indicator of a community’s spiritual health. A church that does not pray will become sick and die; but a church who prays will be able to glorify God in any circumstance it faces.

Singing and Praising – “praising God”

While the Bible makes it abundantly clear that everything we do should be worship (1 Cor. 10:31), we must not overlook the joy God receives through corporate celebration and praise. During church services, in homes, or wherever we gather, the church can worship God through singing (Ps. 7:17, 27:6, 47:6-7; Eph. 5:19, Col. 3:16; James 5:13), playing instruments (Ps. 33:2, 150:3-5), dancing (Ps. 30:11, 149:3, 150:4), clapping hands (Ps. 98:8), raising hands (Ps. 28:2, 63:4, 134:2, 141:2; 1 Tim. 2:8), bowing knees (Is. 45:23; Rom. 14:11; Eph. 3:14), testifying (Ps. 9; 66:16, 71:15, 73:28, 96:3; Acts 26:1-32; Rev. 12:11), and other sincere forms of adoration.

At GBC we desire to provide an atmosphere where people can learn to praise God through a variety of hymns, modern songs, and praise choruses.

Evangelism – “having favor with all people... adding to their number.”

A church that knows, loves, and worships God will be a church through which God will transform lives. As a church matures, its passion for the lost should increase and the members should seek to love, serve, and reach those who do not know Christ. The next section will further develop how a church should join God in His mission of glorifying Christ.

Reaching Out

Jesus said in Luke 19:10, “I have come to seek and save that which is lost.” His passion was to reconcile lost people to His Father. This passion was evident in both His life and death, but also in the way He called His disciples. In Jesus’ first conversation with His disciples he said to them, “Follow me and *I will make*

² Mk 9:50; Jn 13:34, 15:12, 17; Rom 12:10, 13:8, 14:13, 14:19, 15:5, 15:7, 15:14, 16:16; 1Co 6:7, 7:5, 11:33, 12:25, 16:20; 2 Cor 13:12; Gal 5:13, 5:15, 5:26; Eph 4:2, 4:25, 4:32, 5:19, 5:21; Phi 2:3; Col 3:9, 3:13, 3:16; 1Th 3:12, 4:9, 4:18, 5:11, 5:13, 5:15; 2 Th 1:3; Tit 3:3; Heb 3:13, 10:24, Heb 10:25; Jam 4:11, 5:9, 5:16; 1 Pt 1:22, 4:8, 4:9, 4:10, 5:5, 5:14; 1Jo 1:7, 3:11, 3:23, 4:7, 4:11, 4:12; 2 Jo 1:5

you fishers of men” (Matt. 4:19) and in his last He said “... *Go therefore and make disciples* of all the nations...” (Matt. 28:16-20). Jesus made it clear that anyone who was following Him was not just following a man, but they were joining the Son of God on His mission.

The bookends on the calling of a disciple of Jesus is discipleship. The mission of the Master becomes the mission of those who know Him. The Apostle Paul further explained this reality in 2 Corinthians 5:17-20 where we see how God has transformed us in Christ to be His missionaries:

“Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come. Now all these things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and *gave us the ministry of reconciliation*, namely that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and *He has committed to us the word of reconciliation*. Therefore, *we are ambassadors for Christ*, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” – 2 Cor. 5:17-20

When we are “in Christ” everything changes. Our old purposes, passions, and priorities (making money, being successful, being happy, being popular) pass away when we come to know Jesus. Through His Spirit God replaces our purposes, passions, and priorities with His own. We are now called ambassadors for Christ who are entrusted with the “ministry of reconciliation.” An ambassador is a representative in a foreign land. Jesus reconciled us to God and has planted us where we are to be His representatives on the mission of reconciling the world to Him.

Are you living out the mission of God? We must be willing to take what God has given us and use it in His mission. There are two important truths that, if we embrace them, will help us do this.

First, *you are who you are by God’s design*. God has uniquely created you (Ps. 139:13-16) and allowed everything that has happened to you in your life to shape you into the person you are today. God shaped your face and body to look like they do, He gave you the unique personality you have, and He allowed every hardship (divorce, molestation, heart break, miscarriage) and high point (graduation, marriage, childbirth, successful business) to make you who you are.

Second, *you are where you are by God’s design*. God not only uniquely shaped you to be who you are, but He sovereignly and strategically placed you where you are to be His missionary (Acts 17:26). God has placed you in the family, neighborhood, classroom, and recreational place you are in for a reason. You do not live where you live in the world or when you live in history by chance. God has sovereignly placed you where you are to know Him and make Him known.

Who leads the church?

Jesus

The Scriptures are clear that *Jesus Christ* is the head of the church (Eph. 1:9, 1:22–23, 4:15, 5:23). He is the Apostle who plants a church (Heb. 3:1), the Lord who builds the church (Matt. 16:18), and the Chief Shepherd who rules the church (1 Peter 5:4). Ultimately Jesus decides to close down a church when they have

become faithless and/or fruitless (Rev. 2:5). Therefore, it is absolutely vital that a church love Jesus, obey Jesus, imitate Jesus, and follow Jesus at all times (Col. 3:16-17).

Elders and Deacons

Elders are the male leaders of the church who are also called bishops and overseers (Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11; 1 Pt. 5:2). The elders are men chosen for their ministry according to clear biblical requirements (1 Tim. 2:11-3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9). The elders are always spoken of in plurality because God intends for more than one man to lead and rule over the church in order to protect all involved. The elders' duties include leading their families well (1 Tim. 3:4-5), ruling (1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Pt. 5:2-5), managing (1 Tim. 3:4-5), being an example (Heb. 13:7), teaching (Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:2), preaching (1 Tim. 5:17), doctrinal instruction (Titus 1:9), and discipline (Matt. 18:15-17).

GBC is an "elder led" church. This means that selected men make decisions that guide the church under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. In the elder led model there is no congregational voting. Members of GBC are encouraged to attend elders' meetings to voice their hopes, encouragements, opinions, or disappointments. The elders are always open to what the people have to say, but because they will answer to God for their decisions concerning the people of the church (Heb. 13:17), they must have the authority to lead the church in the direction they feel God is calling them.

Additional elders can be added as the leadership of the church recognizes them. The process of adding an elder is as follows. First the elder would be contacted regarding the position. If he is willing, he will be interviewed by the existing elders according to the Biblical qualifications. If he is approved, he will be placed before the congregation for a time of testing. If no one has any concerns that are worthy of disqualification, the candidate will be declared to be an elder at an official ceremony during church.

Deacons are servants of the church who are also qualified for their ministry of overseeing and caring for God's people by qualifications that are nearly identical to the elders. Unlike elders, deacons can be either male or female (1 Tim. 3:8-13 especially 3:11; Rom. 16:1-2) and do not need to be skilled with teaching and preaching abilities (1 Tim. 3:8-13). The office of deacon is given to qualified servants to fulfill specific tasks within the local congregation (Acts 6:1-6). As elders, deacons are not voted into their position, but rather are selected by the elders in a process similar to that of adding an elder.

Should all Christians be vitally involved in a local church?

Hebrews 10:25 *"Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching."*

The Old and New Testaments were written to communities of God's people who regularly gathered together for such things as teaching, fellowship, worship, etc. The Bible is clear that every Christian is a part of the larger church body and is expected to participate in the life of a local church with the gift(s) God has given him or her (1 Cor. 12:1-31). It is therefore a sin for someone who claims to be a Christian not to be actively

loving his or her Christian brothers and sisters (1 Jn. 1:7, 3:17–18, 4:21) and seeking to build up the church (1 Cor. 12:7, 14:6, 12, 26b).

At Graham Bible Church, we desire to see people walk faithfully with their God in service of His Kingdom. In the following lessons we will examine what it means to serve the purposes of God through the gifting of His Holy Spirit. We each have a vital role in His Body and have been gifted to serve as priests in His Kingdom. Let us be faithful in this high calling of Knowing Christ and Making Him Known.

For further reading

9 Marks of a Healthy Church by Mark Dever

The Master's Plan for the Church by John MacArthur

Elders and Leaders by Gene Getz

Brothers We are Not Professionals by John Piper

Total Church: A Radical Reshaping around Gospel and Community by T. Chester and S. Timmis

The Open Secret by Lesslie Newbigin

The Gospel in a Pluralist Society by Lesslie Newbigin

The Celtic Way of Evangelism by George Hunter

The Missional Church by George Hunsberger

The Church Between Gospel and Culture by George Hunsberger

Resident Aliens by Stanley Hauerwas

Church History in Plain Language by Bruce Shelley

Other great articles and books are available at www.GOCN.org.