

What The Church Is (And What She Isn't)

I really love talking about church.

Not, as in, *my church* or *your church*.

Not, as in, *what flavour of church*, in a denominational sort of way.

And not, as in, *which kind of church; mega church, home church, missional church, or cell-group church* (and, oh boy, I wish whoever had come up with that last descriptor had really given it a bit more thought...).

I love talking about church, as in, *The Church*. The bride of the lamb, the woman of valour formed from the saviour's side, the universal, time-transcending, death-defying reality, made up of many individual and diverse parts but united together as one organic, institutional identity.

There is nothing quite like her in all the world.

She is more powerful than the world's greatest empires, having outlasted and outlived them all. While earthly rulers have come and gone, long departed into dust, she remains still.

She is more transformational than alchemy, the almost-magical science of transmutation; changing one substance or organism into something else entirely. For it's within her very body that weak and decaying humans, desperately indentured to sin, are rescued, released, and restored to become children of God who will themselves transcend even death itself.

She is *not of this world*, for there is no rational, natural explanation for her existence. She is the tangible and visible evidence of an untouchable and invisible God who is Sovereign over all, the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. It is His

Spirit that gave her birth, His Spirit that sustains her, His Spirit that saves, seals, and sanctifies her.

She is both a witness and an invitation, a light piercing through the darkness of this cosmos showing who God is, what He's done, and what He's doing still. She is God's hands and feet, His eyes and His heart, His sacrificial love, and His call to radical repentance and salvation to those around her. She is the community of His people, the kingdom *now-but-not-yet*, an unfulfilled but certain promise of everything that is yet to come.

She is magnificent and yet flawed, a constant work-in-progress as she is shaped into the complete image of the Christ, the one who was God-With-Us. She will be, at the end of days, the light that the nations of the world will walk in, the place where the kings of the earth will bring their splendour; adorned with the glory of God and shimmering like the rarest, most precious jewel ever seen.

This is who she is: a gospel-shaped, gospel-saturated, and gospel-sending living and breathing organic reality.

She Isn't Perfect

What the church isn't is a community made up of people who have everything sorted and who are no longer troubled by sin, disease, death, or disaster. In reality, Jesus brings real people, deeply flawed and very different from one another in life together, into relationship, into the messy, untidy reality that is the church, *not because they are worthy, but because Jesus died for them and that is enough.*

It's Jesus who is building his church and he builds it through imperfect people who are being made perfect in *his* righteousness and through *his* strength. Regular, average humans like you and I are made more than conquerors, because of Jesus.

We still struggle with the impact of sin in our world, and in our own lives. We are acutely aware of God's original intention for His creation and how far from that this world really is. We long, with all of creation, to see humanity released from the grip of disease and death, to see creation restored, to see the peoples of the world living in peace and harmony with one another.

And yet, despite the flaws in ourselves and the failures all around us, the imperfect church is the hope of the world. She is the living reality that God has been and is still working to make all things new.

Long ago, God intended to use the church as an example of His incredible wealth and grace towards humanity and His intention and plan to bring everything together under Christ, for His own glory. She is imperfect and yet magnificent because the living God is the source of her existence and empowerment.

Sometimes it's hard to know how to hold these two realities in tension; that beautiful and incredible collective that Jesus is building, alongside the dark reality that the church has often been a deeply flawed, sinful, and unhealthy institution.

But one thing we know for sure, she belongs to Jesus, He has loved her and redeemed her, and will make her perfect and all glorious at the end of time.

She Is Diverse And Yet United

The Church is made up of those who have put their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. The apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans makes this clear. *"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."*

This reality cuts across cultural, economic, gender, and racial divides and it caused no small stir in the early years of the church, as it continues to do today.

Initially planted in the soil of Jerusalem, the gospel message soon spread rapidly beyond Israel; throughout Judea, Samaria, and the rest of the Mediterranean world. In as little as just over 10 years after Jesus' resurrection, Christianity had already reached as far as Rome itself. As Jesus had promised, his followers were to be his witnesses, even to the ends of the earth. Yet the gospel call often demanded radical upheaval in the lives of those who accepted it.

In a world of slaves and masters, the Church soon learned that God's rule of love transcended any man-made law and that in Jesus, both slave and master were equal and were to consider one another as family.

Culturally disparate groups like Jews and Gentiles learned they were not so different after all, that the same God was the source of life for them both, and that both were intended to share equally in the riches inherited as God's children. They, too, were to think of each other as family, children of the same father, equally loved and precious.

Men and women, long considered to exist within a tiered hierarchal structure learned that, in fact, they were two equal halves of an incredible whole, created and intended to work alongside each other in the mission and purpose of God. The long and complex history of patriarchy was subverted by Jesus' redemptive message and restorative ministry, particularly good news for many women.

All those united *with* Christ are also united *in* and *by* Christ, putting on this radical new identity like a new set of clothes. Their differences – and there were many – were brought under the authority of Christ. Each person found equal and common ground in Jesus, and in the reality that they all shared in one Spirit, God's guarantee of their future inheritance.

She's Exclusive And Yet Inclusive

Here's a startling reality: the church isn't made up of *good people*, people who *do good things*, people who think Christianity is *morally helpful*, or even people who *happily affirm* the historical Jesus.

The church is made up of those *who have put their faith in Jesus for salvation and who confess that he is Lord and Christ*. Quite simply, if you aren't following Jesus the King then you aren't one of Jesus' followers.

The church exists *because of* Jesus and *for* Jesus. Each person who calls themselves a Christian acknowledges they have been saved out of the dominion of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of the Son of God's love. They have placed their lives under the authority of Jesus as Lord and King.

Church people are therefore kingdom people, living in a fellowship under King Jesus, with lives that "*are literally connected to things before the creation of the world and extending far into eternity*"(Matter Of The Heart). The church is the tangible evidence of the reality of the kingdom of God.

But five Christians getting together for a BBQ, or two Christian mates out catching some waves together is not a church. Although they're all individual Christians, and, collectively, a group of Christians, they're not 'church' simply by virtue of their getting together in a social capacity.

The church *exists for a specific purpose* and the *church gathers (in local expressions) for a specific purpose*.

Christians regularly gather in groups, in all sorts of places, all around the world to affirm and oversee one another's membership in Jesus Christ and His kingdom. They fly the banner of Jesus, so to speak, and affirm those who are

baptised in his name, through gospel ordinances (baptism and breaking of bread) and gospel practices (disciplining, worshipping, serving, praying, and hospitality).

This is the definition of a local church, an expression of the one, universal church and, in this way, the church is unapologetically exclusive by nature. The church is only made up of Christians.

And yet she's also inclusive in character, or at least ought to be. The good news of Jesus Christ and his kingdom is offered to anyone, no matter their race, gender, status, or situation. There is no sin too great that would bar someone from accepting God's grace and there is no degree of goodness that means a person isn't in need of that same grace.

Before God, we are all in the same miserable situation, dead in our sins, and yet, through Christ, we are all offered the wonder of forgiveness and the hope of more to come; life and life in abundance.

God sent His son as saviour for all the world, not just some people. Not just the people we get along with it, the people whose company we enjoy, or the people who make us feel good. The undeserved gift of grace is offered to all, even our annoying neighbour, intolerant boss, or the shady local car mechanic.

The church hasn't always done a great job of being welcoming to the outsider, of making it comfortable for the skeptical seeker to venture through the doors, of listening to the questions, doubts, or struggles of those wrestling with their faith in belief or in practice. She has oftentimes laid on people burdens too heavy to bear with little tolerance for those of modest faith, who may need much encouragement and discipling along the way.

She has sometimes portrayed the Christian journey as something of a sprint to glory, rather than a long endurance in the same

direction with many failures along the way.

Yet her character should reflect the character of God; not willing that any should perish and desiring that all would have the opportunity to hear the message of salvation. She is the space where people can meet with God, where they can grow in faith, where they can fail and find forgiveness, often many times over, and where they can learn to love one another, despite their differences, because of the love they have received in Jesus.

The church is exclusive by nature but should be inclusive in character; diligent in preaching the desperate state of humanity and our need for Jesus, but abundant in grace and kindness, ready to welcome the repentant sinner home.

I Love The Church

I love the church. I love talking about her and thinking about her, and I love being a part of her.

I love her history, in all its grandeur and with all its flaws, but I particularly marvel at her miraculous beginning. From betrayal, death, and seeming hopelessness sprang life and hope, and endless joy.

Over twenty centuries ago, in the still darkness of a garden tomb, the Son of God took his first resurrection breath and, at that moment, his church was born, ignited by the Spirit and destined to last for all eternity. She is imperfect and yet magnificent, flawed and yet more beautiful as each day passes; the visible reality of an unfulfilled but certain promise of everything that is yet to come.

There is nothing quite like her in all the world.

Why Belonging To A Local Church Isn't Optional

The last six months have been an unsettling and disruptive time for millions of people around the globe. The impact of COVID-19 on our ordinary routines and daily habits has been, in many cases, bewildering. The ways in which we would usually connect have had to adapt to these new and strange times – and it seems we're not out of the woods just yet. Our lives may not return to normal any time soon, if, in fact, at all.

COVID-19 Discloses A New Reality

COVID-19 has also brought to light just how busy and frantic *normal* actually was and, for many people, the slower pace and limited ability to travel too far afield has come as a welcome relief. This has been an unexpected opportunity to slow down and 'smell the roses', enjoy time with family, working or learning at home and passing lazy afternoons with nowhere particular to be; apart from in the garden or buying essentials at the supermarket!

For others, however, the sense of isolation and abandonment has been acute. Loneliness, anxiety and depression have been constant companions, with no assurance of when things might return to normal. Being able to still connect, albeit in the online space (hello Zoom!), has been critical for many people to support their mental health and maintain a sense of community and belonging.

For many Christians, however, the inability to 'go to church' (ie to gather physically together in a building) has uncovered a new reality; one that has perhaps laid hidden and

undisturbed beneath the surface of our busy, ordered, *normal* lives.

What has been exposed is the troubling reality that when habit or routine no longer forces us to physically show up to church, we quite often stop showing up emotionally. Our connection to church – to the local expression of the body of Christ – is revealed to be a shallow, top-surface connection, driven and maintained only by habit. As soon as the opportunity to exit has materialised, we've opened the door and welcomed it with open arms. Physically, we may have been attending church, but emotionally, we've been long gone.

Is Church-Going Important?

The necessity of finding other means to connect as a church and the resultant disconnect for many Christians has highlighted important questions: Why do Christians gather anyway? Is 'going to church' even important?

Nearly 50% of Australians believe that church-going is no longer relevant. Out of a list of 13 facilities and 10 services that people agree a community needs, including foods and cafes, parks, libraries, local childcare and sports facilities, relationship seminars and support or social activities for seniors, a local church comes in at 13 and 9 respectively (only just ahead of English classes and migrant support, in the case of the latter).

Clearly, for many people, church-going is not only personally irrelevant, but it's also considered practically superfluous to a community's needs. At a time when the ability for gathering together in person has been greatly limited, increased disconnect from 'church' has been, for many Christians, a sobering reality.

Yet the Bible tells quite a different story. It describes [the church](#) as an essential reality, in vibrant, organic language;

as a body, a vine, a family, a woman, a building of living stones, a kingdom. It describes the church as a single identity, made up of many individuals, with the ability, as a corporate reality, to affirm and give shape to the lives of each Christian who becomes a member. It reminds us that when we choose the King, we are also choosing the King's people.

“The starting point of the Christian life is an unqualified trust in the power of Jesus’ death and resurrection to save humanity from sin, a trust that comes to individuals through grace and by faith. Once that trust in Jesus has been born in us by the Spirit, then our baptism signifies our willingness to commit ourselves to God, to submit to the lordship of Jesus, and to identify ourselves not just with the church but as the church.” | Lucy Peppiatt

Paul the Apostle speaks at length about the connection between the individual and the church. He comments in the book of Corinthians that “God has carefully placed each part of the body right where he wanted it”. This body of believers is governed or directed in all its functions by the head, who is Jesus.

It's remarkable that God has designed the human body – every part dependent on every other part – as a working model for understanding our lives together as a community of believers (1 Corinthians 12:27).

How Do We Identify Ourselves Not Just With the Church But As The Church?

Why is it important for a Christian to feel like they not only have a local church they call 'home' but that they truly belong there? How does a Christian identify not just with the church but as the church?

“A local church is a group of Christians who regularly gather

in Christ's name to officially affirm and oversee one another's membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances." | Jonathan Leeman

Acts 2:42-47 describes not only *how* but *why* the first Christians began gathering themselves together. They were a new organic identity, citizens of the kingdom of God, 'called out to follow and serve King Jesus'. These new Christians regularly gathered together to honour God and His Son, to grow in community, to grow together spiritually, to give themselves in service and to share and witness to the good news of the risen King. We describe these collective [Christian activities](#) as 'worship', 'fellowship', 'discipleship', 'ministry' and 'evangelism'.

The local church is the tangible evidence of the reality of the kingdom of God. Church people are [kingdom people](#), living in a fellowship under King Jesus, with lives that "are literally connected to things before the creation of the world and extending far into eternity" (Ecclesiastes 3:11) (Matter Of The Heart).

Gathering together as a local church is therefore a public declaration, to both fellow Christians and to the world, that an individual has submitted to the rule of King Jesus and that their allegiance has been transferred to him. It affirms that each person gathered is a person of the kingdom, for whom Jesus is Lord. It's how one Christian says to another Christian: *"What! You too? I thought I was the only one."* (C S Lewis)

Through Christ's work on the cross, Christians have been made his body, his family, his temple, his people, his flock, his joy and crown. But they only become these things collectively, never individually. *"Christianity isn't meant to simply be believed; it's meant to be lived, shared, eaten, spoken, and enacted in the presence of other people. Try as I may, I can't*

be a Christian on my own. I need a community. I need the church.” | Rachel Held Evans

The Christian life, as it turns out, is a package deal. If you choose the King, you must also choose his people.

Why Belonging To A Local Church Isn't Optional

The biblical imperative of belonging to a local church is an important and often neglected conversation. The idea of committing can seem uncomfortable, even legalistic for some people. For many Christians, the experience of church has been one of hurt and disillusionment.

Not every church hurts people, but most churches have hurt someone at some point, simply because churches are made up of imperfect people. This reality can leave people reluctant to re-engage, afraid of being hurt again, wanting to protect themselves, and questioning the place of the church or even God in their lives.

“Christians need relationships to grow. We don't grow in isolation; we develop in the context of fellowship.” | Rick Warren

Yet despite all the imperfections that can be found within a church or the fact that a church can (and will) mess up and get it wrong, it's the way we're supposed to 'do life together' as Christians.

Jesus didn't say that he would 'build Christians', but that he would build 'his church', purchased with his own blood and of which he is the chief cornerstone (Matthew 16:18, Acts 2:28, Ephesians 2:20). His language is organic, inclusive and corporate. His church, as an instituted organic reality, has authority and governance that an individual Christian simply doesn't have

Church isn't just something we go to, it's the tangible evidence of the reality of the kingdom. Church isn't just an event we attend, it's a fellowship we belong to (1 John 1:3, Acts 2:42, 1 Corinthians 1:9). Choosing a church home – choosing to belong to a local church – isn't optional but essential for a Christian.

'The local church enables the world to look upon the canvas of God's people and see an authentic painting of Christ's love and holiness. The local church lays down a pathway with guardrails and resting stations for the long journey of the Christian life.' | Jonathan Leeman

What If I Don't Feel Connected to My Church?

The church was born from the death and resurrection of Jesus and He continues to be the source and lifeblood of the church. Any life or energy a church possesses must flow from him, the risen King. Christ's rule – in the life of the church and in the hearts of its members – is absolute. Jesus is Lord.

If you're struggling to feel a sense of connection or belonging to your local church, we'd suggest there are two possible reasons for this:

1. Jesus is Lord of your heart, but unfortunately, he's not the Lord of the church you're part of. This is a difficult situation to be in but not without hope. Our suggestion is to pray about this and then engage in open and genuine conversation with the members of your church. Gently voice your concerns and suggest ways to encourage the church to 'return to its first love'.

One of the seven churches named in the book of Revelation, the church at Ephesus, faced a similar situation. They are commended by Jesus for being diligent in good works and for

their perseverance, their intolerance of heresy, and their endurance of many hardships in his name; but they had lost their warmth and zeal for Jesus.

“Relationship had simply become religion and passion little more than cold orthodoxy. The first love which characterised the Ephesians was the zeal and ardor with which they embraced their salvation as they realised they loved Christ because he first loved them (1 John 4:19) and that it was, in fact, his love for them that had made them “alive together with Christ.” So overwhelmed were they by the joy that came from understanding their former state—dead in trespasses and sins—and their new life in Christ, that they exhibited the fruit of that joy (Ephesians 2:1-5). Because of God’s great love for the Ephesians, they were “made alive in Christ” and that new life was exhibited in the passion of gratitude.” | [Got Questions](#)

2. Jesus is Lord of the church you attend, but not the Lord of your heart. This is a more challenging situation and perhaps the place to start is where your Christian life first began: with the reality that *‘greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends’* (John 15:13).

Supreme love was demonstrated and made visible in Jesus’ death on the cross and it’s in this sacrifice that we also see the love of God, that *‘while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.’* (Romans 5:8). Remind yourself that you are deeply loved and comprehend the fact that, in Jesus, you are forgiven and set free, fully reconciled and made right with God. You are His dearly loved child and a citizen of His kingdom, saved by grace through faith alone and not because of anything you have done. As Christians, we belong to God and He loves us with the love of a perfect Father (John 14:18, 1 John 3:1).

Give your heart entirely and with no hesitation to the King who died for you and everything else will flow from there.

If you're struggling with your identity as a Christian or want to understand more about God's work of grace in your life (and how that causes radical transformation), I would highly recommend reading the following two books: "What's So Amazing About Grace" by Phillip Yancey and "Emotionally Healthy Spirituality" by Peter Scazzero.

The Christian life isn't always easy and the next step isn't always clear. Sometimes we need courage to take that step and sometimes we just need to stand still and watch God go to work for us.

A Glorious Reality: The Church of Christ And It's Local Expressions

"Picture, if you will, a globe with all the nations of the world mapped out on it. Now picture one little embassy of light. It's a gathering of Christians, gathered together in the name of their King, Jesus. Then the point of light divides itself into two, then four, then eight, and so it goes.

A new nation is growing, a nation set inside the nations. The new nation leaves the boundary lines on the map where they are, but it cannot be contained by the map's lines.

The line makers don't have the authority to stop these unworldly citizens. The points of light cross all boundaries, spreading everywhere like yeast through dough, or like stars appearing one by one as the night sky darkens.

These are the churches of Christ and their members. The world has never known anything like them." | Jonathan Leeman

The Church | A Woman Of Valour

(Not a reader? Take a listen instead ↓)

This article is dedicated to the memory of William Tyndale (c 1490-1536), an active and passionate Christian writer and translator, whose historical influence on the translation of the Bible into English cannot be overstated. Tyndale was convinced that the Bible alone should determine the practices and doctrines of the church and that every believer should be able to read the Bible in his own language *“The church of Christ is the multitude of all those who believe in Christ for the remission of sins, and who are thankful for that mercy and who love the law of God purely, and who hate the sin in this world and long for the life to come.”* – William Tyndale

In my recent article, [‘The People Of The Kingdom’](#), I noted that **the church is the tangible evidence of the kingdom of God**. Church people are kingdom people, living in a fellowship under King Jesus, with lives that *“are literally connected to things before the creation of the world and extending far into eternity”* ([Ecclesiastes 3:11](#)) (Matter Of The Heart). By looking more closely at how the Bible describes the church, we will also see what the advancement of this kingdom of God looks like, in reality, demonstrated in the lives of those men and women who gather together as the church.

What Does ‘Church’ Mean?

Our English language Bibles were translated from manuscripts written primarily in two languages; Hebrew (in the Old Testament) and Greek (in the New Testament). The translative history of the Bible is a fascinating journey, from an academic and historical perspective, and is well worth

exploring. You can [read more about the translation process here](#).

In the New Testament, the word translated into English as *church* is not actually a translation or even a transliteration of the original Greek word. The translators of the first English language Bibles generally elected to use the English word *church* (which had emerged first as the word *kirk* and finally evolved through the centuries into the word *church*), as an English equivalent of the original Greek word. The first usage of this word 'church' in English was as a building in which religious meetings were held, but eventually it came to be used for the people in the building too. By the time translators began translating the Greek manuscripts into English, it had been in accepted use in English for a long time. In all truthfulness, however, it wasn't an accurate translation of *ekklesia*, which is the original Greek word.

The original Greek word used in the New Testament – *ekklesia* – is a compound of “*ek*” (out of) and “*klesis*” (calling), a derivation of “*kaleo*” (call). A literal meaning would be “*a calling out*” or “*the called out.*” An *ekklesia* was originally a select civil body, summoned or convoked for a particular purpose and the word, in and of itself, didn't have any religious meaning attached. In Acts, the word *ekklesia* is used of a riotous mob (Acts 19:32 and 41) and also used to refer to a lawful gathering in Acts 19:39.

Ekklesia should perhaps be more accurately translated in English as *assembly* or *congregation*. However, the King James Version, the 'authorised' (and most commonly read) translation for many years, renders it *church* some 76 times, *churches* 36 times, and *assembly* three times. Most other translations follow the KJV's example. Essentially, the translators chose to replace *ekklesia* for another Greek word (*kuriakon* which, by this time, had already made its way into English as 'church').

Despite this, it would be true to say that the word *church* is

now an extremely established and recognisable word in our modern English, and it has been used for centuries as the English equivalent of *ekklesia*, however erroneous the original translative methods were.

But What Does Church *Really* Mean?

Today, most people would understand the word *church* to mean one or all of three things:

1. A **place of worship** (the original meaning of the word *kuriakon* ('*belonging to the Lord*'))
2. A particular **denomination or religious group** within Christianity (when attached to a name, for example, an *Anglican Church*)
3. A **body of Christian believers** (*the church*)

The primary goal, when trying to understand the use of the word *ekklesia* (in the context of the Bible's original meaning) is not necessarily to reinstate a truthfully accurate translation of the original word (although that would, of course, be a more proper process of translation) but to correctly understand the **meaning** of the original word. We know that words change meaning over time and also that it's not the word itself that is important, but how we understand and use that word. Do we talk about and describe the church in the same way, today, that the first-century authors did? (For the sake of continuity, we will discuss the biblical meaning of *ekklesia* in this article using the established English equivalent *church*).

The Bible never speaks of the church in the sense of a building or organisation. Neither does it speak of the church in the sense of a particular denomination. The biblical definition of church is actually about the people – those who place their faith in Jesus Christ for salvation (John 3:16; 1 Corinthians 12:13). These people are the global community of believers who gather together in 'local expressions of

church'. The Apostle Paul describes this community like the human body, a living thing – made up of real people (1 Corinthians 12:12). The New Testament authors don't describe many churches but one, simply expressing that '*where two or three are gathered in my [Jesus'] name, there am I among them.*' (Matthew 18:20).

In the early years of the church, these gatherings were known, for example, as *the church that met at Corinth* (1 Corinthians 1:2), or *the church at Ephesus* (Ephesians 1:12), communities acknowledged to be the one body of the Lord 'scattered abroad' (Acts 8:1-4, 1 Peter 1:1). The church is about people – **the people are the church, the *ekklesia*** – called out, connected in relationship by Jesus Christ and assembled together for a purpose.

There's a very real sense that many Christians are returning to this original meaning behind the word used by the New Testament writers; that is, to view and speak of the church as an *organic identity*, made up of 'people who are called and gathered together as a community in Jesus'.

A 'Called Out' Community

In the first few chapters of Acts, we read of the birth of the church in a rush of wind and fire; a pivotal moment in history where people begin responding to the call of the gospel and the announcement of Jesus as the risen king and saviour. Peter's sermon in Acts 2:14-36 'cut many of the listeners to the heart' and his life-changing teaching regarding Jesus caused many to receive his words with gladness, believing that Jesus was both the risen Lord and [Christ](#) (Acts 2:36). This belief and repentance of their sin was demonstrated by them being baptised – 3000 people in one day!

Acts 2:42-47 describes how these individuals began gathering themselves together as a community 'called out to follow and serve King Jesus'. We begin to get a sense of the reason for

the use of the word *ekklesia* by the apostolic writers to describe the formation and purpose of this one body of believers.

Throughout Acts, there are examples of the believers meeting together as a community and the purpose of these gatherings can generally be summarised by five key elements:

To honour God and His Son – ‘**worship**’

To grow community – ‘**fellowship**’

To develop personally – ‘**discipleship**’

To provide service to others – ‘**ministry**’

To share the Good News – ‘**evangelism**’

Being ‘called out’ is a common theme in the New Testament:

- Jesus came to **call** sinners (Matthew 9:13, Mark 2:17, Romans 8:30).
- By God’s [grace](#) and mercy, He **calls** people from among Jews and Gentiles to be His people (Romans 9:24-26).
- The believers in Corinth were **called** into fellowship with Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 1:9).
- God **calls** believers to [peace](#) (1 Corinthians 7:15).
- The **calling** is by the grace of Christ (Galatians 1:6).
- The believers in Galatia were **called** to [freedom](#) (Galatians 5:13).
- Paul implored the saints at Ephesus to walk in a manner worthy of their **calling** (Ephesians 4:1, 1 Thessalonians 2:12).
- The believers at Colossae were **called** in one body (Colossians 3:15).
- God **calls** believers into His own kingdom and glory (1 Thessalonians 2:12).
- God **calls** believers to conduct their lives in holiness (1 Thessalonians 4:7, 2 Timothy 1:9, 1 Peter 1:15).
- God **called** the believers in Thessalonica by the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:14).
- God **calls** believers out of darkness and into His marvellous light (1 Peter 2:9).

These passages all cite the original greek word *kaleo* ('to call' or 'called') and have to do with a believer's relationship with God and their connection to His eternal purpose. We can also see the connection here with the use of the Greek word *ekklesia* to describe the collective community of 'called out' people – believers that assemble together.

Metaphors For The Church

Other metaphors are used throughout the Bible to describe the community of believers, one of which is that believers form a spiritual 'house' – living stones to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5).

Another metaphor is the human body, a living thing – made up of real people (1 Corinthians 12:12). Paul devotes a whole chapter in the book of Corinthians to the principles and purpose of 'church' and how each 'member' of the body is to be valued for the diversity and contribution they bring to 'the body'.

This metaphor of a body is further expanded as yet another metaphor, that of a particular kind of body, the body of a bride; the fiancée and intended wife of 'the lamb' (John 3:29, Revelation 3:12). We are given to understand from Ephesians 5 that the relationship between Jesus and the church wasn't modelled on the first marriage but, in fact, it was the other way around. God had the church in mind from the very beginning and our understanding of marriage is therefore modelled on the relationship that would exist between Jesus and his bride. Therefore, if we want to understand how the church, as the bride, relates to Jesus, we are to look to marriage and the examples given in both the record of creation in Genesis and Paul's writings in the New Testament. Marriage is our human way of experiencing and understanding how we, together as one body, relate to Jesus as his church.

“A wife should put her husband first, as she does the Lord. A husband is the head of his wife, as Christ is the head and the Savior of the church, which is his own body. Wives should always put their husbands first, as the church puts Christ first. A husband should love his wife as much as Christ loved the church and gave his life for it. He made the church holy by the power of his word, and he made it pure by washing it with water. Christ did this, so he would have a glorious and holy church, without faults or spots or wrinkles or any other flaws. In the same way, a husband should love his wife as much as he loves himself. A husband who loves his wife shows he loves himself. None of us hate our own bodies. We provide for them and take good care of them, just as Christ does for the church, because we are each part of his body. As the Scriptures say, “A man leaves his father and mother to get married, and he becomes like one person with his wife.” This is a great mystery, but I understand it to mean Christ and his church.” | Ephesians 5: 22-32, CEV

The Birth Of The Church

We are to think of the church – this community of believers – as a woman, a woman whose very life and existence were framed by the death and resurrection of a man. Through this man’s death and sacrifice, she is created and at his resurrection, she becomes a living creature. We see the obvious echo in the story in Genesis of the creation of Eve from Adam’s side:

“The Lord God said, “It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a companion for him who corresponds to him.” The Lord God formed out of the ground every living animal of the field and every bird of the air. He brought them to the man to see what he would name them, and whatever the man called each living creature, that was its name. So the man named all the animals, the birds of the air, and the living creatures of the field, but for Adam no companion who corresponded to him was found. So the Lord God caused the man to fall into a

deep sleep, and while he was asleep, he took part of the man's side and closed up the place with flesh. Then the Lord God made a woman from the part he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man. Then the man said, "This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; this one will be called 'woman,' for she was taken out of man." | Genesis 2:20-23, NET

What an eloquent phrase: *'bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh'*! Adam looks at this new creation and exclaims *"this is my very own self, from my very own body"*. She is man's counterpart, not merely in feeling and sense – his flesh – but in his solid qualities. We also have another significant phrase – *'taken out of'* – echoing 'the call' that goes out in Acts 2. Here in Acts, we read of people being 'taken out of the dominion of darkness and transferred into the kingdom of light and life'; visible proof of the power of the Gospel to bring about a new creation. Without the death and resurrection of Jesus, there would be no church, no new creation, no bride. The insistence of the critical reality of the resurrection of Jesus being connected to the fulfillment of the gospel promise was the firm teaching of the first century Apostles and this remains the solid framework of the existence of the church today.

"Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel." | 2 Timothy 2:8, NIV

The woman in Genesis is the man's possession, not in the sense of ownership, but rather in the sense of belonging. She is from him and of him, they belong together and are as one body. Paul comments on this being 'profound' and that ultimately, he is referring to the church's relationship with Jesus (Ephesians 5:32).

A Woman Of Valour

The word used of Eve at her creation is the Hebrew word *ezer*, which is translated as '*helper*' in English. However, our understanding of *helper* falls far short of the original sense of the word, which is used elsewhere in the Bible to describe God as a helper to His people or of a king to his subjects. The primary idea of the word lies in '*girding*', '*surrounding, hence defending*', to '*protect or aid*'. The counterpart, therefore, to the man is "a *woman of valour*, whose worth is incalculable" (Proverbs 31:10).

We have this extraordinary *woman of valour* fleshed out in more detail in Proverbs 31:10-31; a famous passage celebrating 'the virtuous woman (or wife)'. We would perhaps understand *virtuous* to mean '*having or showing high moral standards*', but the original Hebrew words *eshet* and *chayil* used in these verses don't convey virtue or virtuousness in the same way we would understand '*virtuous*' today. The Hebrew word *eshet* is the construct form of *isha* (woman) and *chayil* connotes bravery (Psalm 76:5); capability (Proverbs 12:4); triumph (Psalm 118:16); or strength (Psalm 84:7). In the 17th century (when the first English Bibles were translated) *virtuous* still suggested the French '*virtu*', which at the time meant '*manly*' or '*brave.*' A better translation of the Hebrew words *eshet chayil* is '*woman of valour*' (as translated by the Tanakh Jewish Bible (1917)). This *virtuous woman* is the same woman who is also, in the King James translation, '*clothed in strength and honour*' (Proverbs 31: 25).

If marriage is modelled on the church and her relationship to Jesus, then it's not such a stretch to recognise the ideal woman in Proverbs as a detailed portrait of what the well-functioning, organic body of the church looks like.

"She obtains wool and flax, and she is pleased to work with her hands. She is like the merchant ships; she brings her food from afar. She also gets up while it is still night, and

provides food for her household and a portion to her female servants. She considers a field and buys it; from her own income, she plants a vineyard. She begins her work vigorously, and she strengthens her arms. She knows that her merchandise is good, and her lamp does not go out in the night. Her hands take hold of the distaff, and her hands grasp the spindle. She extends her hand to the poor and reaches out her hand to the needy. She is not afraid of the snow for her household, for all of her household are clothed with scarlet. She makes for herself coverlets; her clothing is fine linen and purple. She makes linen garments and sells them, and supplies the merchants with sashes. She is clothed with strength and honour, and she can laugh at the time to come. She opens her mouth with wisdom, and loving instruction is on her tongue. She watches over the ways of her household, and does not eat the bread of idleness. Her children rise up and call her blessed, her husband also praises her..."
| *Proverbs 31: 13-22, 23-28*

What a remarkable description of the capable, industrious, joyful reality of the organic church; a living, breathing *woman of valour*, of which every believer is a member and valued part.

The Bride And The Lamb | The Story's Resolution

Yes, Christians are stones making up a house (1 Peter 2:5).

Yes, Christians are branches connected to a vine (John 15:1-7).

Yes, Christians are subjects and citizens of a kingdom (Ephesians 2:19).

Yes, Christians are children of a heavenly Father (1 John 3:1).

Christians are all these things. But these are still metaphors for the individual. It's only when we consider marriage, as a metaphor of the church and the king being brought together, as one, that we understand that the Christian life isn't intended to be experienced as individuals but as a collective community. The church – the *woman of valour* – is created from the body of Jesus, who was crucified, buried and raised the third day, just as the first woman was taken from the first man. Together, Jesus Christ and the church are one body. She, the church, is the bride of Jesus and He, Jesus, is the spotless lamb who was slain from the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:22-23, Ephesians 4:4, 2 Corinthians 11:2, Acts 20:28, Colossians 1:24, Revelation 13:8).

The first two chapters of Genesis are where we first discover God's eternal purpose for humanity. The last two chapters of Revelation tell us of the glorious resolution of God's story. And Paul's words in Ephesians assert the *"supremacy and centrality of Jesus Christ in all this, together with his counterpart, the church, which should dominate our understanding of everything physical and spiritual."* – Frank Viola

"Christ did not die just to save us from sins, but to bring us together in community. After coming to Christ, our next step is to be involved in community. A church that does not experience community is a parody, a sham. Simply put, the purpose of the church is to stand for God's eternal purpose. In short, wherever the church gathers together, its guiding and functioning principle is simply to incarnate Christ." – Frank Viola, *Reimagining Church*

"Let us rejoice and be glad and give Him the glory. For the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready." | Revelation 19:7, BSB

"The heart of her husband has confidence in her, and he has

no lack of gain. She brings him good and not evil all the days of her life.” | Proverbs 31:11-12, ESV

Author’s Comment: A Further Brief Note Regarding The Translation Of ‘Church’

The English language was first spoken as a Germanic dialect, known as Old English or Anglo-Saxon, beginning in northern England some years after the Anglo-Saxon conquest (circa 449 AD). The earliest written Old English, however, did not appear until approximately 800 AD. Probably sometime around 500 AD, the people in northern England started referring to a building erected for worship as a *cirice*, later, *chirche*, and finally, a *church*.

By the time William Tyndale translated the New Testament from Greek to English (known as the “Tyndale Translation”, 1525 AD), the word *church* had been in use for centuries. Throughout these centuries, the state church had maintained its power over the people through bloody crusades against resistance groups for the sake of “doctrinal purity.” It was claimed that the Apostle Peter had started the church (based on Matthew 16:18); and therefore the church should be lead by a clergy and not placed in the hands of any “congregation or assembly.” Not only that, prior to the fourteenth century, a complete Bible in the English language, for the common people, didn’t exist. Even for modestly educated clergy, the Bible was mostly inaccessible – available only in the Latin language and in large folio copies of two or three volumes. These Bibles were ridiculously expensive, limited in number and difficult to access. For the most part, the clergy had to rely on the small portions of scripture that were included in prayer books.

In his translation of Matthew 16:18, Tyndale rightly translates the Greek word *ekklesia* as *congregation*, as opposed to the word *church*, signalling a return to a correct understanding of the organic reality of the church. Tyndale’s accurate translation of this one word threatened the power and

control of the entire state church system. Knowing Tyndale's translation was soon to become public, to be read by the common people in their own language, presented a real threat to the power of the religious institution of the day. Tyndale was told to amend his translation. Despite being threatened by the religious leaders of his day, William Tyndale would not revoke his translation of the word *congregation*. Ultimately, he was betrayed, sentenced to death, and burned at the stake in 1536.

In 1604, King James of England and Scotland commissioned a new translation in response to perceived problems or flaws with earlier translations which did not "*conform to the ecclesiology and reflect the episcopal structure of the Church of England and its beliefs about an ordained clergy*". Instructions were given to the translators that the new version would conform to the ecclesiology of the Church of England (which, by now, had broken with and was directly in opposition to the Roman Catholic Church). As such, certain Greek and Hebrew words were to be translated in a manner that reflected the traditional usage of the church, now long-entrenched and in common use. Ecclesiastical words such as *church* were to be retained and not to be translated as *congregation*.

The King James Authorised Version was published in 1611 and quickly grew in popularity. It still remains a significant and popular English translation today. Unfortunately, however, the inaccurate use of the word *church* to replace the original *ekklesia* became firmly embedded in most translations with many readers unaware of the problematic nature of its translative history.

Can we unravel and reverse nearly 500 years of linguistic and cultural understanding that now surrounds the word *church*? Can we edit and reprint millions upon millions of editions of the Bible in English, which, in truthfulness, used a word that was an inaccurate representation of the original? Should we withdraw every copy of errant English Bibles from circulation, simply because it contains the word 'church'? Is it possible to determine what was genuine translative prerogative or

suspect ecclesiastical bias, then or now? The answer is clearly 'no' to all these questions.

A better solution, perhaps, and one worthy of investing our energy and resources to, is to rediscover the original meaning that the New Testament writers had in mind – the organic reality of a community of believers – and to speak, think and believe this of the church today, recognising that wherever the church gathers together, its guiding and functioning principle is simply to incarnate Christ.