

# THE BIG JOURNEY

## from Creation to New Creation



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The New Testament Greek word for 'church' is *ekklesia*, meaning 'congregation' or 'assembly'. Meeting together is the single most important activity of a local church.

## fourteen ► God's New Humanity

### Introduction and Questions

#### Images of the Church

John Stott said, ". . . *the church lies at the very centre of the eternal purpose of God*". Being part of the Church is central to our own lives, too, as believers.

The word 'church' can be used both of the worldwide Church and a local church. To distinguish them, we'll use a capital 'C' for the former and a small 'c' for the latter. ► **The worldwide Church** includes, in Wayne Grudem's words, "all the people of God for all time, both Old Testament believers and New Testament believers". ► **The local church** is any local gathering of God's people.

The New Testament pictures the Church in a number of ways: it's a **temple**, a **body** and a **household**. Each picture suggests *an integrated, interdependent community*. And the Church is **the Bride of Jesus Christ**. God's people are as closely related to Him as it's possible for any created being to be.

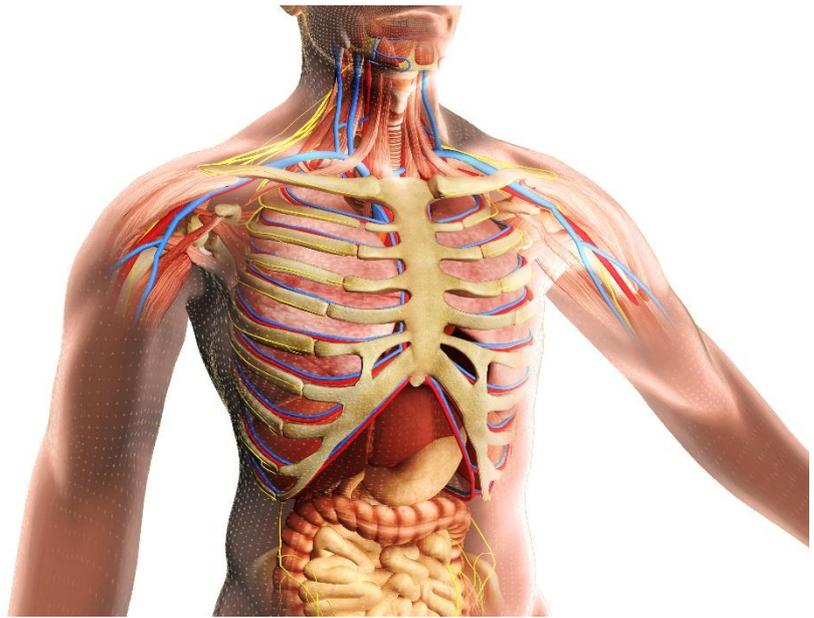
#### A royal priesthood, a prophetic people

In the study notes for Session 3, we saw that God commissioned mankind to be His **priests**, **kings** and **prophets**. But Adam and Eve's sin sabotaged all this. So, through the ages, God has been working to restore that original calling. Now He has made the Church His priests, and His royal and prophetic people.

- The church is a **priesthood**. As priests, we're to live in His presence and serve Him. We're to offer Him sacrifices: for example, praising and thanking Him; praying and interceding; "*to do good and to share*" (Hebrews 13.16). J.G.D. Dunn says that among God's people "*all ministry on behalf of others is priestly ministry . . .*".
- The Church is God's **royal nation**. Jesus is now seated at His Father's right hand in heaven, enthroned in absolute authority over all creation. And we are seated with Him and share His dominion over evil powers. Jesus has enlisted us, the Church, in His final 'push' to plunder Satan's domain, extend His Kingdom and make disciples in every nation on Earth.
- The Church is a **prophetic people**. Amos says: "*For the Lord GOD does nothing without revealing his secret to his servants the prophets*" (Amos 3.7). God

shares His plans and purposes with His Church. We're called to stand in His presence and hear what He is saying to us by His Spirit. Then we can serve Him with true insight and direction.

### Spiritual gifts



Each organ of the human body contributes to the health and function of the whole. The body of Christ, too, has different organs – or “members” (Romans 12.4-5, 1 Corinthians 12.12,27). Each member has a vital role in the function of the body – a role fulfilled through spiritual ministries and gifts.

The Church is pictured as a body – **the body of Christ**. God equips each believer to make their special contribution to the body's health and growth. He does this by giving each of us spiritual gifts (listed in Romans 12.6-8, 1 Corinthians 12.8-10 and 28-30, and Ephesians 4.11). They're not the same as natural talents or abilities (though there's doubtless a strong connection). Some spiritual gifts seem rather 'mundane' (such as helps). But they're as dependent on the Spirit for their function as the more 'supernatural' gifts. And every gift is to be used as an expression of love to God and to His church. Even the most gifted member of the body is nothing without love.

### Gifts of speaking and insight

- **Prophecy/prophets** A prophecy is a Spirit-inspired revelatory message, through which God may guide, direct, encourage, challenge, or instruct.
- **The message of wisdom and the message of knowledge** These seem most likely to be insights into Biblical truth that the Spirit brings spontaneously to someone's mind.
- **Teaching** This is exposition and application of the Scriptures.
- **Evangelists** Evangelists proclaim the gospel (meaning 'good news') to unbelievers, and to build up believers.
- **Giving encouragement or exhortation** This is probably primarily a spoken gift, although the words flow from an encouraging heart and attitude.
- **Discernment of spirits** This is the gift of discerning whether something is from the Holy Spirit, from a demonic spirit, or has a human origin. A key use is when assessing a prophecy – this seems to be the gift's main context.
- **Tongues and interpretation of tongues** Tongues are Spirit-inspired utterances that are unintelligible to the speaker and, usually to the hearers, too (but it may sometimes be in a language that one or more listeners understand, as happened on the Day of Pentecost). When used publicly, tongues need to be interpreted so that the church can understand what's being said. It seems clear that Paul considers tongues to be utterances directed to God – prayer, praise and adoration.

### Gifts of service and leadership

- **Apostleship**. The word 'apostle' means 'someone who is sent'. Apostles may open up new territory for the gospel, or lay solid foundations in newly planted churches. They may also be needed to support and guide established churches.
- **Pastors** This word can also be translated *shepherds*. They care for God's people in the way a shepherd tends his flock.
- **Leadership** This may mean

(1) someone who presides or leads or (2) someone who comes to the aid of others – assisting, caring, supporting, and protecting. The first is perhaps more likely. ● **Administrating** This is giving guidance (not administration as we think of it), probably especially to the whole church rather than to individuals. ● **Helping** This may include all kinds of assistance; perhaps especially (though not exclusively) to those who are weak or disadvantaged. ● **Serving** This is practical service – perhaps especially organising and providing for believers' practical needs. ● **Contributing** or **giving** This is most likely sharing one's own goods and possessions with others, especially the poor. ● **Acts of mercy** This probably covers any act of mercy, for example, providing for the poor, and caring for the sick and elderly.

#### Gifts of special power

● **Faith** The gift of faith seems to be a special God-given conviction that He will exercise His power in some specific way. ● **Gifts of healings** This phrase is plural in the Greek. This suggests that each instance of healing is a gift in its own right (rather than a more permanent 'healing ministry'). ● **Miracles** This covers *anything* that God does through His supernatural power; it isn't limited to healing. "*Working*" and "*miracles*" in 1 Corinthians 12.10 are both plural in the Greek, suggesting that each miracle is a gift in its own right (rather than a more permanent gift of a 'miracle ministry').

#### Elders and deacons

● **Elders** (also called 'overseers') have oversight of a local church. They're shepherds of God's flock. Eldership demands godliness, maturity, wisdom and strength of character to nurture, guide and discipline. Elders must have a firm grasp of Biblical truth and be able to teach, at least in informal settings. Eldership should typically function in teams, though usually one elder presides over the team. ● **Deacons** look after specific functions or activities within the church (the Greek words simply means *servant*). This may have simply been a function or ministry rather than a publicly recognised office.

#### Meeting together



[Uzbek table fest](#) © Vilsekogen : Flickr.com (CC BY-NC 2.0)

A simple meal that includes bread and wine. In the early years, the Lord's Supper seems to have been celebrated at every Sunday meeting of a local church, and it's pretty certain it was part of a full meal. These communal meals were doubtless accompanied by prayers, praise or teaching. The meal may have opened with the distribution of the bread, while a cup of wine may have been passed around at the end.

The New Testament Greek word for 'church' is *ekklēsia*, meaning 'congregation' or 'assembly'. Meeting together is the single most important activity of a local church. But why do we meet? David Peterson tells us: "**Paul's emphasis is on coming together to participate in the edification of the church**". How does this work out in practice? Acts 2.42 seems to provide a basic pattern for our meetings - **teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayer**. The New Testament pattern seems to require sufficient space to allow contribution from a variety of people, and flexibility to allow the Holy Spirit to direct the meeting, whilst maintaining order.

Each meeting might include at least some of the following: **Teaching** can take a



A house in Pompeii © Sean Hayford O'Leary : commons.wikimedia.org (CC BY 2.0)

The House of Paquius Proculus in Pompeii – a fine Roman house remarkably preserved by being buried by material from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in AD79. In the foreground is the main hall or 'atrium'; the pool in the centre is the 'impluvium' which collects rainwater from an opening in the roof. Beyond, and through another room, you can see part of the 'peristyle' or cloister – an open courtyard or garden surrounded by a covered colonnade. First-century churches met in homes – for example, those of Priscilla and Aquila, and of Philemon. Ron Meacock tells us: "No doubt, early Christians preferred a good-sized home as the venue for a local church gathering, and the patronage system would impose on wealthy members the expectation that they host the gathering." Such a group would eat the Lord's Supper in the dining area and then perhaps move (if the group was large) into the spacious and airy atrium, or the peristyle.

number of forms; more than one person might teach at a meeting, and it may include discussion and debate. **Public reading of the Scriptures** was vital in the days when most people didn't have easy access to the written Scriptures; it's still vital today. **Prayer** included **praise, thanksgiving** and **adoration**, as well as **intercession**. In New Testament times, there was probably considerable variety in the way that praise and adoration was expressed. As well as song, people may have offered spoken prayers of praise and worship; this may sometimes have been in a tongue, followed by an interpretation. There may also be **prophecy, messages of wisdom** or **messages of knowledge, words of encouragement, tongues** and **interpretation of tongues**.

**The Lord's Supper** is central to local church life. In New Testament times it seems to have been typically celebrated weekly as part of a full meal. Eating the Lord's Supper is an act of fellowship with God and with our brothers and sisters who eat with us. The bread and wine symbolise Jesus's body and blood given for us. We remember that it was His death that bought our fellowship with God and each other and made us part of God's family.

## Bible passages and questions

- 🔍 Read Romans 12.4-5, 1 Corinthians 12.12-27, Ephesians 2.19-22, 5.25-32, 1 Timothy 3.15 What do the three images of the Church – a human body, a temple, a household - have in common? And what is the significance of this?
- 🔍 Read Exodus 40.34-35, 1 Kings 8.10-11, John 14.16-17,23, 1 Corinthians 3.16-17, 2 Corinthians 6.16-18, Ephesians 2.19-22 (again), 1 Peter 2.4-5 The Church is God's temple. What implications does that have for our lives?
- 🔍 Read Matthew 3.11, Luke 12.50, Acts 2.38, 22.16, 1 Corinthians 12.12-13 (again), Galatians 3.27, Romans 6.1-11, Colossians 2.11-14, Titus 3.4-7, 1 Peter 3.18-21 What is the meaning and significance of baptism?
- 🔍 Read Luke 22.14-20, 1 Corinthians 11.17-34 Why is the Lord's Supper a meal?
- 🔍 Read Romans 12.6-8, 1 Corinthians 12.8-10, 28-30, Ephesians 4.11 Of the spiritual gifts, are there any that stand out as specially important? If so, why?
- 🔍 Read Acts 2.42, 13.1-3, 20.7-11, 1 Corinthians 14.1-40, 1 Timothy 2.8-14, 4.13, Hebrews 10.24-25 What are the purposes of our meetings as a local church?

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