

What Is The Church?
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Today I want to divert from our study of the book of Ephesians in order to talk about something that is on my mind, and I believe in my view. It has to do with the church. It has to do with the nature, purpose, definition, and function of the church.

What is the church? I know that may seem like a simple question, but I promise you that the answer is not simple. The answer may seem simple to us because of how little we see. But the answer to that question is as deep as Christ Himself. The church is not a "what". The church is a "Who". In a sentence, the church is the living body of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now we're all familiar with that sort of language. It is very common to call the church the "body of Christ". But I'd like to ask that we all try to put down our ideas about that this morning. Whatever your ideas are about the body of Christ, I'd like to ask you just to set them down and walk away from them this morning. Lets just loosen our grip on concepts and give the Lord some room this morning to define His own body by His appearing.

The church is NOT this building. You all know that. I know that we talk about "coming to church" on Sunday because its just a habit of language. But we know that this is just a figure of speech. The church is not a place.

And in order to correct this view, many would say that the church is, in fact, the people who come to that place. The church is a bunch of people. I've heard before, and probably said myself, that the church is not the building but the people who meet in that building. And while that is certainly a more correct understanding than seeing the church as a building, its not exactly correct either. I mean, it is certainly true that Christ dwells within his people, and that we are His body. And, as the body of Christ, we have come to be His church. That is true. But I'd like you to look with me one step further. This is a true view...but see if you can't focus the lens a little more and see an even greater understanding.

Let me try to say this a few ways. It is true that we are the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, but even so, the church is not what we add to Him, but rather what He gives of Himself to us. Christ, the Son of God, lives in our soul – this is true. Christ dwells in me and has made me His church, but there is still much in me that has no place in His church. In other words, just because Christ dwells in me does not mean that everything I am, everything I do, everything I think and want, every so-called spiritual idea and effort is a valid expression of His church. Can you understand? **So the church is not where I am giving something of myself to Him, but rather where He is working something of Himself in me. What I am trying to say is that He defines the church, and I do not. His actual LIFE is the parameters of the church because the church is His body.**

Let me try to explain what I'm saying with an analogy. It is a little bit like your body. Your soul is the life of your body. Your body is the habitation for its experience and expression. Your life gets to define the parameters, the boundaries of your body. That being so, I could walk up to you with a manikin arm and duct tape it onto your shoulder so that you now have three arms. **But even though I've added my idea to you, I have not added anything to your body. Your body is not what I add to you. Your body is already defined by the parameters of your life.**

I could glue a papier-mâché head next to your head and always talk to it when I address you. I could burry you in outrageous clothes, douse you in make-up, add all kinds of robotic limbs and ears and digits to your body, and even call you by a different name. But despite all of these things I have attempted to add, none of it has changed what your body is. **It's just a bunch of ways that I'm projecting my own misunderstanding onto you.** No matter what I do or think, your body is defined by your life and not by my misunderstandings. Your body already has its parameters. **Your body is only where your life lives.** And we all know that I have no right or ability to try to define your body.

Well, that's what I'm trying to say about the church. The church is the body of Christ...and we are that body, but still it is not *our* ideas about Jesus. We are the body of Christ, but that body is not comprised of any of our ideas about ministry, fellowship, truth, missions, prayer, etc. We don't have a right to define his body by ourselves. Certainly we have been made to be His body, but we only operate AS His body to the measure that He has defined all things by the Light of His Life.

I don't have a right to glue one of my favorite religious ideas onto his body and call it an arm. I don't have the ability to bring my definitions of life, ministry, prayer, purpose, love, truth, salvation, cross....or anything, into a body that is already defined by His life. **In fact, I cannot even begin to operate as His body unless I have forgone all things that I would seek to add to Him, and allow Him to be the reality and definition of Himself in all things.**

Can you see what I'm saying? There is nothing that did not come out from Him that is a part of Him. There is nothing that is not already an aspect of Him that I can call a part of His Church. **The church is defined by the Person. It is not anything that we add to it. It is solely what He is, and what He works in us. That is the church.** The church is Christ operating in His body, not our religious manikin arms that we want to add on to Him. And for you and I to operate as the church, there is only one thing that must happen. The person of the church, the life of the church, has to define all things in His appearing. When we see Him, and know Him who is the life of His body, then we can begin to function as an experience and expression of Him.

And just as you and I only recognize the aspects of our body that are defined by our life, so to God only recognizes those aspects of the Lord's body that are defined by His life. It is true that we are the church, but we are experiencing and functioning as the church only to the measure that we are abiding in His Life, knowing Him, walking in the light of His life. Christ Himself is the parameters of the church.

The reason I'm saying this is that I realize in myself how I have, unknowingly, defined his body, defined his church by my own understanding. And I can't tell you

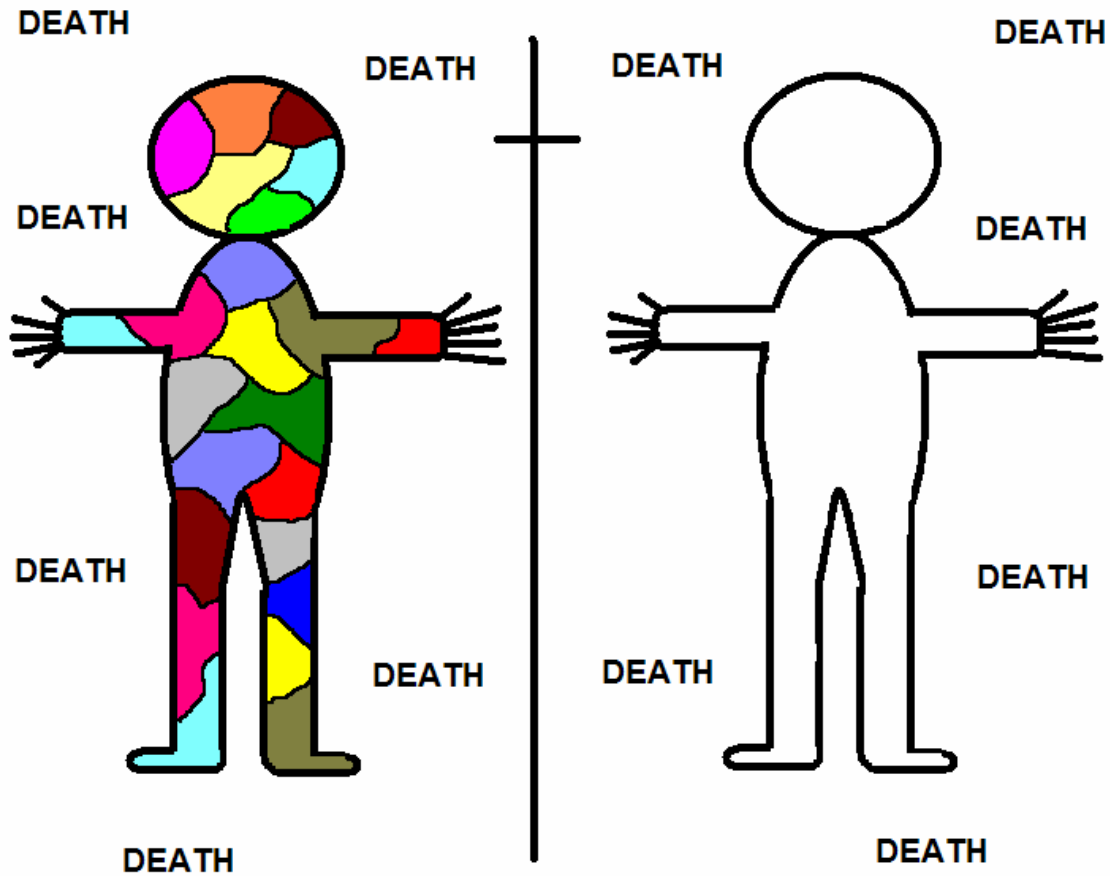
how deep that rabbit hole goes. There is no bottom to it. Again, every view of the Lord's body that has not been born in the Light of His appearing has been conceived in the darkness of my own understanding. And there are so many things that I have tried to glue on to His body. There are so many robotic limbs that I have added thinking that I was simply preserving and teaching what was already Christ. And I was wrong.

If you remember, last week we talked about empty words. Words are empty when we have filled them with ourselves. Words are empty when we have filled them with our own meaning. Words are only full when the reality itself has defined the word. Well, we can't take the words of the New Covenant, fill them with our own meaning, and call it the church. Can you hear what I'm saying? I'm not trying to be critical or harsh. I'm really not. I'm just trying to state a fact that there is no way to avoid. It is **simply a fact that the life of Christ Himself, revealed by the Spirit of Truth, defines the boundaries of what church is.** Only when God gives humanity a view of His Son by His Spirit is there anything of the church being experienced.

Somebody says "that's pretty narrow minded". But think about that for a second. Truth is always as narrow as the mind of the Lord. What if somebody came up to you and said "hey, lets go for a swim in your back yard". And you respond by saying, "I don't have a pool". And they say, "don't let that stop you. Who needs a pool. Lets go for a dip". And, of course, you insist that you can't swim in the yard because there is nothing there to swim in. And then your friend says, "You know, its pretty narrow minded for you to restrict swimming to only where there is water!". It's the same way in the church. Somebody says, "hey, lets go fellowship with God. I've got some great ideas about fellowship! I've got a fantastic idea about how to worship." Its like taking a swim in the dessert.

God is *extremely* concerned with what He knows to be the parameters of Christ. God is incredibly jealous for what He understands to be the Life that defines the church. And for you and I to know fellowship, that fellowship must be in the Light. **IF** we walk in the Light as He is in the Light, then our fellowship is with the Father and with the Son. For you and I to know church, we must come to God's view concerning the Son who defines what church is.

God is serious about the parameters of Christ. How serious is He? Just how jealous? Well, you can get a nice picture of it by looking at the types and shadows of the old covenant. Let me try to explain this using a diagram this morning.



In the Old Covenant, Israel was brought into a relationship with God through the death of a lamb. They actually partook of the lamb's blood, the lamb's death. And then, in the morning, they came forth from those blood covered doors as a new reality. They were a new creation. Now this is all type and shadow, but it is a type and shadow of something that is now spirit and truth. They came out as one body, one corporate man. They came out, God says, as "Israel My Son, even My Firstborn". And this, as we have talked about many times, corresponds to the reality of Christ's resurrection. Those who are joined to the Lord have become one spirit with Him. There is not a bunch of Americans and Costa Ricans in Christ. There is one new man where Christ is all and in all. We've talked at length about this.

But Israel did not know who they were. They were brought into a covenant, into a relationship, concerning which they had no understanding. As far as they were concerned, they were just a crowd of escapees that just got let out of slavery. That pretty much corresponds to our initial understanding of salvation as well. So what did God do about this? What did God immediately begin to do? God immediately began to show them HIS understanding of what they were. He began to teach them the nature of the relationship that they had with Him. You could put it this way, God began to show them the boundaries of their relationship. He started putting parameters on "Israel my Son". He showed them what was, and what was not, part of this relationship. He showed them the boundaries outside of which there was only death.

And so, in this diagram, on the left side of the cross you will see my representation of corporate Israel. Corporate Israel is one man, and that man is defined according to the Law. What is the Law? The Law, simply put, is the boundaries of God's relationship with Israel. It is the parameters of this one man. Can you understand what I mean by that? You must do this. You must never do that. This is how you should do this. All of these different divisions that you see drawn in the man on the left represent the various aspects of the law. The various commandments about all of the things that God understood His Son to be.

So the priesthood must be exactly like this, because this is what my Son is. And the sacrifices must be done exactly like this, at this time, in this place, because only in this way does it represent my Son. And the furniture of the tabernacle must be made exactly according to the pattern I showed you on the mountain, and must be arranged precisely according to these instructions because, in this way, you will illustrate the reality of my Son. Everything of the Law was like that. The Law was NOT just a bunch of rules that God required. The Law was the parameters of Israel my Son. It defined their corporate existence. It defined, in words, the covenant. And each of the little divisions in that body in the diagram represent the various aspects of the Law, which corporately represent one man.

Alright, I explained all of that in order to ask a question. What was outside the parameters of this Son? In other words, what was outside the boundaries of the Law? For instance, what if you disregarded one of the rules about sacrifices, and brought a giraffe to the altar? What if you decided you could use some of the anointing oil from the tabernacle for perfume? What if you broke the Law with regard to murder or adultery? Well, there was only one thing outside of the boundaries of this man, the parameters of the Law. **There was separation and death.**

Now, depending upon what you did, that separation and death was demonstrated in various ways. In some instances, you were dragged outside of the camp and killed with stones. In other instances, the death that existed outside of this man was illustrated by blood on the altar. You broke the covenant by living, you are restored to the covenant by dying. In other words, your own ideas and trespasses and sin transgressed the boundaries of this relationship, but if you bring those things to death, represented through the blood of an animal, you could be restored to the fellowship of the Son. I'm trusting the Lord to fill in the blanks here. We don't have time to look at all of this in detail.

In other cases you were completely cut off from Israel. And in some cases, when you became unclean through various ways that were not congruent with or a fitting picture of this son...either by uncleanness, leprosy, or impurity, you had to excuse yourself from the camp until you became ceremonially clean again.

What's my point? My point is that there is nothing outside of the parameters of this man except death. **My point is that God defines the covenant by showing them His Son, and the Son is the boundaries of what they are, what they do, where they go, how they worship, how they serve, how they live. The Law was the central aspect in every facet of their lives in this covenant because it defined God's understanding of His Son.** I don't know a better way of saying that, and that's why I drew the picture. What is the picture? **In a word, the picture shows that the Son defines Israel. The people do not define the Son. Christ is the definition of his corporate body.** Outside of the son, Israel

could do a lot...but it would all amount to death. Apart from Him, there was separation and death.

I'm going to relate this to the body of Christ in just a moment. But I want you to understand something very clearly. I want you to see that the body of Old Covenant Israel was defined and understood and identified and delineated in the revealing of the Son in whom they had relationship with God. The boundaries of what they were, what was real, what had meaning, what was allowed...none of it was up to their imagination or their opinion. It was shown to them as various aspects of Christ. Various views of Christ that God represented in offerings and sacrifices and feasts and laws. How did God reveal His Son in the old covenant? He revealed His Son by teaching them the covenant. He revealed His Son by showing them the pattern of Who was coming. He taught them His view of who they were. And then they existed in that view. They fellowshiped in that view.

And when they departed from God's view, there was only death. **There wasn't another version of covenant outside the boundaries of the Law. There wasn't another relationship with God that they could have outside of His understanding of the Son.** Can you see that? Can you see how important this was to God. Do you recognize that when people blurred these boundaries they were killed. Often they were killed by God. God showed them that there was only death outside of His covenant in very tangible, undeniable ways. In some cases fire came from heaven and consumed people. In some cases the ground opened up and swallowed them. In other cases he sent poisonous snakes among them. Why? Because He was ticked off? No, because outside the boundaries of Christ there is nothing but death and snake bite. Can you see the imagery?

Brothers and sisters, the boundaries of the old covenant are the shadows of the boundaries of the new. **The law of the letter has given way to a greater law. The law of the letter which described the Son in words has given way to the law of the spirit of Life in Christ Jesus which describes and defines the son through the revealing of His indwelling life. There are still parameters to Christ. There is still NOTHING but death outside of the boundaries of Israel. The Person of Christ defines the church. The parameters of Christ are the ONLY THING in which there is fellowship, church, ministry, growth, purpose, etc.**

In the Old Covenant, bringing your own ideas into this fellowship cost you your life. Friends, bringing your own ideas into new covenant fellowship costs you your life too. God's probably not going to toast you with fire from heaven. But the death and deception and separation that is outside of the Light is more severe in the substance than it ever was in the shadow.

This realization should put something of the fear of the Lord in us. If not, then I don't think we have seen it clearly. We think things like – "well, I haven't seen the Lord, but the least I can do is serve Him". I'm sorry to have to say this, I know how it might sound to some...but NO you cannot. How, exactly, do you plan on serving Him? Do you think you naturally know what it is to serve Him? Do you think that because you read his book that you can do His will? No. Apart from Him you can do nothing. Unless He is the author and finisher, the beginning and end, the source and fountainhead, the mind and will that is working in you all things, then you can still do a lot of things, but they will not be what he considers his body. They will not be what He considers the work of His church.

Unless all that we call service is defined by His Life, how can we call it service? If you had a limb that you could not control, and that did not move by your life and was not constrained by your will, would that limb be serving you? So you see, you can't say "I haven't seen the Lord but at least I can serve Him". Why? Because Christ's life defines the church. His life puts the parameters on what is, and what is not, Christ.

Somebody says, "I don't know much about the revelation of Christ, but at least I can pray. At least I can be an intercessor." I know these are hard words, but no, you can't. Not really. Not in the name of Jesus. What is prayer? Who taught you how to pray before the Spirit of Truth revealed the reality of it? Is prayer in this covenant not supposed to be done in His name? How can we pray His will if His name is not revealed in us? How will our prayers be anything other than *our* ideas and *our* will projected onto Him? Paul says that we do not know how to pray and the Spirit helps us in our weakness. But what if that Spirit is not permitted to show us the deep things of God? What if that Spirit of Truth has not been allowed to show us the parameters of Christ? What then is our prayer? It's *our* desires, *our* thoughts, *our* name, attached to His body.

Somebody says, "I don't know much of the reality of the cross working in my soul, but at least I can worship!" Friends, I'm sorry, but no you can't. I mean, sure you can sing songs to God all day and all night. I've done that. But worship is defined by the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ raising up to His Father. Worship is the incense that Christ brings before His Father, and that works in you through conformity to His death, burial, and resurrection. Worship is something that has come from the outward types and shadows of the tabernacle of David and become the inward fulfillment of spirit and truth. You are now the tent out from which his song arises. You are the instrument that fills God's ears with the song of the Lord. Can you hear what I mean? I'm not talking about music. I like music. I like singing songs that are full of true things. We can sing as much as we want. Go for it. But Christ is still the substance of worship. Christ defines worship, because worship is part of His body.

And though it is the most natural thing in the world for us to do, we cannot bring our ideas about service and our ideas about prayer and our ideas about worship and our ideas about anything, and glue them onto the Lord's body. Just because the Bible speaks of prayer and service, doesn't give us the ability to define it apart from seeing Him. Just because Paul prayed, doesn't mean that we inherently know how to pray, or even know what prayer is. In John 16, Jesus said until now you have asked for nothing in my name, but now you can ask in my name and receive everything from my Father. He says that something like 5 or 6 times in John 14 – 17. We love the idea of getting whatever we ask for...but somehow we fail to realize that the key to the entire thing is the reality of praying in HIS NAME.

The more I have seen the Lord, the more I realize that I have defined his body in my own understanding. The more I have seen in the Light, the more I understand what I have created in the darkness. It's not pretty to see it. But its true. I see that I have loved many things outside of the parameters of Christ. We need to hear this! When I see clearly, **I see that I have loved many things outside of the parameters of Him...and because I loved them, I have attached them to His body in my own ignorance. I have glued them to His Church because I wanted them to be there.**

We must never, ever, disregard anything that IS Christ's body. But by the same token, we must ALWAYS disregard everything that was born out from our own understanding and imagination about His body. You don't throw away worship, you throw away the man who defined worship before Christ was the substance of it. You don't throw away prayer, you throw away the man who defined prayer before the true reality appeared in the seeing of Christ. Because to whatever extent you don't let that man go, to that measure you will not know the Lord.

I'll close with this statement: You understand the church, and you function as the church, to the extent that you have seen the Life that defines the church. God reveals the covenant, and then we fellowship in that covenant. God shines the Light, and then the fellowship is in the Light. Amen.