

The Perfect Church

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Sometimes, when someone mentions anything to do with church, especially when it is brought up in a group of people with varied backgrounds and beliefs, like in a workplace, you can either imagine or sense the energy around you suddenly twist into a knot, even before the final "ch" is completely enunciated. For anyone who has ever invited someone from work, or a neighbor, or someone at the gym to the church they attend, as soon as the method is worked out in one's mind as to how to slip that word church in, it can become almost a natural reaction for the person asking, to grimace, and to hold one's breath in anticipation of what their response will be. Why is that? Is it in fear of not knowing what that person will think of them if they're asked to go to "church" with them? But then, what is so horrible about asking someone to go to church with you? Is it in the fear of rejection? Why would that be? If you were to ask a friend to go to a music concert, or a comedy show, or a movie, or to a talk by a renowned scientist on quantum physics at your local university you wouldn't probably have the same sort of angst as you would asking them to go to church with you. Strange, isn't it? Perhaps *some* of the tension has to do with those things. Yet, it can be said that the opinions people have about church are as numerous as there are people in this world, or so it seems. So then, everyone has one (an opinion that is). Perhaps it has something to do as well with what Robert Lewis pointed out in his book, The Church of Irresistible Influence when he said:

" Today, numerous studies confirm that the public, especially media and intellectual leaders, do not see Christianity as a dominant social force. Instead, six out of ten Americans believe the church is irrelevant."

How rude of them, don't you think? I wouldn't call someone's hobby of needlepoint or bird watching irrelevant just because I'm not interested in it. So where does this apparent insensitivity towards those who choose to go to church, and their apparent apathy toward church come from? I'm speaking of course about their presumably careful choice of the word "irrelevant." Or is it something other than just good old-fashioned bad manners and apathy? Robert Palmer continues to say that the irrelevance that is claimed by the public doesn't just bring about some form of

apathetic response but that it "provokes an ever-increasing cynicism and hostility." Wow, now that's beginning to sound more as though the mere mention of the word church can trigger a response along the lines of, "Church?! Them's fighting words! Put 'em up!" But wait. Once again, I've never been challenged to a fight because I asked someone to go to a ballgame with me (or anything else for that matter.) Just imagine, "hey my good friend, you want to go to the beach and do some surfing?" "Don't you ever ask me that again, and if you do our friendship is over! You got that?!" You take notice of the increase in the volume of his voice with every other word, you see the veins popping out of his forehead and neck, and you hear a strange snarling sound coming from him anytime he's not speaking. "Oh yeah, he's serious," you're thinking, "insane too perhaps." Of course that scenario sounds ridiculous, except of course if their over-the-top reaction was because that person who was asked had something tragic happen to them the last time they went to the beach. So, how can we figure out what is going on in people's reactions to the mere mention of the word church?

A good place to start looking, I suppose, is by finding out what exactly is church and then find out what Christians themselves have to say about church. Since we're asking all these questions, let's throw one more question onto the pile and also ask, why all the "hostility" toward the church? We may have to get to that last question a bit later since I suspect we'll be doing some deep digging to get there. That would mean we need more than one of those shovels you use making sandcastles at the beach, and start with one of the commercial grade shovels they only sell in those specialty hardware stores. Plus, I'd like to stay away from the beach for now. Maybe that can be our reward after we figure all of this out. We'll just be careful I suppose, in who we invite along with us. But it does appear as though we'll have enough to do in digging up what we can find on church. Random House Webster's Dictionary has the definition of the word church as, "a building that is used for public Christian worship." That definition seems to be of benign consequence since they are just buildings after all. Except one could argue that some churches are much nicer looking than others and it could be mentioned that in many parts of the United States, especially down here in the south where I live, there is what seems to be a church within every square mile to which some of them look abandoned and creepy enough to be the scene of a spooky movie. Nevertheless, the

building in and of itself doesn't really seem to be the issue. There are several other definitions for church to be found in the same dictionary, 2) a religious service, 3) the body of Christian believers, 4) religious authority as distinguished from the state. Since we've already determined that first definition of being a building as being inconsequential in stirring up someone emotionally, let's take a look at the other alternative definitions. Number four I suppose we could eliminate since when someone invites another person to church, especially when done in the typical meek, friendly tone that one would identify as customary, they're certainly not inviting them to go to church in rebellion against the state. Now if one is asked to go to church and the person asking shouts the question in a militant manner and they're wearing a ski mask and army fatigues, and their vehicle is loaded with picketing signs and lots of gas cans, rags, and empty glass bottles, then that would definitely give cause for an out of the ordinary reaction, but I'm going to assume that kind of thing doesn't happen often enough to bring about such a biased opinion from so many people. In case you were perhaps thinking, "that definition says, 'religious authority as distinguished', not opposed to the state," yeah, I know but it seemed funnier to me to give an example with a religious militant than to give an example of someone inviting somebody to a church board meeting. Nevertheless, let's assume that definition isn't the issue we're looking for either and move on. We're left with numbers two and three of the dictionary definitions. The religious service and the people that attend the religious service.

For anyone who has been to more than a few church services from different churches in your area of residence, you will come to realize that no two church services are alike. Some churches will have very formal proceedings, where the leaders of the church may be dressed in religious garb, and they may have a variety of rituals that may pique your interest enough to get you to wonder what would happen if you tried that at home. But then, you don't really see any effects such as the heavens opening up or the voice of God thundering His approval. Plus, you may think you better just leave that ritual stuff to the professionals, since after all they seem like they know what they are doing. Some services will be much more lively, be it due to the music, videos that are played, the preaching, or maybe a little or a lot of all of them. Some churches you may go in to you may think that you accidentally walked in on a funeral and not wanting to

cause a distraction you wait it out until the end to leave, to which you may feel inclined to offer your condolences to the host as they shake your hand on the way out. But then in all of that it may get one to finally ask themselves, what are they going to church for in the first place? In some of the church services that you've encountered you may understand the apathetic feelings some would have about church, and perhaps you may have gone to a church where the preacher spent thirty minutes screaming at you to where you were tempted with saying that you don't need that in your life as you're hastily retreating to your safe place at home. Another thing that may be noticed is the difference in the people who make up the "congregations", as they are generally called. Some churches you go into, you may get the impression that it is considered bad form to speak to anyone else, as everyone there is in a withdrawn form of submission to something or someone, I guess maybe in some way it is a form of reverence. I don't really know, maybe only God Himself knows. Other churches may be quite the opposite. You may have so many people trying to talk to you that you begin to get a bit suspicious of them, especially when they hand you a bucket asking you for money. And then during the service there's so much hooting and hollering, and jumping all around, you can't but wonder if that is how these people always are, or if this is some other kind of ritual that churches do. Of course it begs the question, but why? Now then may be a good time to see what it is that Christians themselves call church and why do they go there.

Just as there are multiple definitions to church in the dictionary, you'll also likely get varying opinions from Christians on "what is church". For some it's possible they're likely relying more on preference than knowledge, or you may encounter someone that you would suspect the person asked must have gone to a Bible college or something, when their reply gets you to think, 'hey, that's exactly what the dictionary said!' To be fair, it should be mentioned that it also could depend on how you ask the question. As it is with those national polls that you hear about, where sometimes you find that the ones behind the scenes that are having the poll done, are obviously intending the results to be skewed in their favor. For example, imagine a person who grew up going to a church where they handled snakes, wrapping them all over their bodies while dancing around, that kind of thing, and that person as a child was traumatized by being bitten by snakes

every time they attended church. At this point I certainly hope I'm not opening up old wounds for anyone. Be assured, that you don't have to go to a church that handles snakes ever again, and that a vast majority of churches are nothing like those churches. Let's get back to that person though in our example. As an adult they become an indignant, self-professing church hater, so much that if they were to do a poll on churches they may ask the question like, "you do hate church as much as I do, don't you?!" All the while they're looking at you menacingly, with a sneer, and closed fists. Then as you begin to answer, their friend just behind them, is holding back a vicious dog that is lunging toward you with fierce rage, as the person holding it back is losing ground to the dog and is saying, "I can't hold him much longer!" You change your mind about your response and then resolutely and softly say "sure, i guess" as you begin to move away as quickly and nonchalantly as possible. But really though, there would be a difference in responses to the questions, "what *is* church to you" versus "what is *the* church to you." What is church will likely get you responses as to what one would expect to go on in a church service. While asking what is *the* church will get you probably differing responses about the church being made of all Christians, that it is not just one church building. Or they say that we are all the church, all those that are Christians. They could explain that, as a Christian, as they believe unto Jesus Christ for their eternal salvation and when they received Him, they were given the Holy Spirit, God's Spirit, to dwell in them and so thus, they became, as Paul the apostle said, "the temple of God [or Holy Spirit]". That kind of goes with what others say about what is the church by saying it is all the Christians, or believers in Christ, to which sometimes a preacher will shout out the question, "Who's the church?" Then, the others in unison will declare exuberantly, "We are the Church!" Others, I would imagine, if you asked them "what is the church?", they might reply with a quizzical look and simply respond with, "which one?"

So, getting back to our initial question about why there is amongst the majority of people such an emphatic negative response towards church, or as Robert Palmer put it, *the* church. I suppose for some, they may have possibly just been a poor judge of character when their friend at work asked them to go to church with them, and without thinking they said yes, only to find out that it was some kind of organized serpent worship. Those

people, I hope, are few and far between so let's see if we can steer clear of talking anymore about the snakes. It's time then to dig deeper and get at the heart of what makes churches be, well, churches. For as I mentioned earlier, to which you may have also experienced, each church seems to operate from a different playbook, if you will. But then, the deeper you dig, what ends up being at the roots of how churches function is the Bible itself. At the very least, they'll say that it is what initially inspired them to become a church. Undoubtedly, some churches have expounded upon the Bible to the point that there is no recognizable resemblance of their operations, that at one point had supposedly sprung forth from a Biblical origin, but now instead is seemingly coming from some other book. It may give the impression that it came from a Hollywood Director's Guide, where it's packed full of drama and excitement with even an emotional anticlimax that will bring you to tears (that may have been when they yelled at you about being a sinner and that you're going to hell). From the other end of the spectrum, the church service may seem to be coming from a really bad play script that never had a Snowman's chance in Hawaii at Broadway. That one may have a lot of "Praise the Lord's" and "can I hear an amen" and pleas from the preacher to repeat everything he says. Then after all that, they start at the beginning and do it all over again. And again, and again. Those can be the same churches that repeat the chorus of the song many, many times, to where you're wondering if the worship leader misplaced the other pages of music. By now, it may appear as though I have a rather cynical view of churches as well. Not really. The point I am reaching for is not to pick apart different churches here. In fact, for those examples above I like to think that I would still most likely go home from their service considering myself blessed to have gone (except for the one with the snakes). But to be real, in a way you could probably make humorous observations about almost any church. But what I am attempting to get to ultimately, is to get to the cause of why churches can be so vastly different, while each church seems to lean in a particular direction, and to some with exaggerated distortion, and how that ends up leaving those people that were answering the question in the poll (mentioned above) with a bad opinion about church. For it could very well be the reason so many people are turned off to church-in the fact that they all seem to be grounded and focused on something different. In a way, each church then could be potentially viewed by an invitee as just another weird church where they

do weird things. In Jim Peterson's book, Church Without Walls, he says about churches:

"Every church I know of has distinctives that greatly increase its effectiveness. Distinctives bring focus to action, and thus are very powerful. Their weakness lies in the flip side of focus: the tendency to ignore other truths of great importance that bring balance. So we can lose a part of the Bible because of a narrow focus on our distinctives."

So, each church in one way or another ends up focusing more on certain, as Jim Peterson calls them, distinctives. I guess it makes sense, if your church has a talented worship leader to have more emphasis on the worship time, or if your Pastor is a gifted speaker, your church service may devote more time for his message. But in Jim Peterson's quote he mentions the importance in having balance in a church. After all, a church isn't operating just to bring a bit of culture to your community.

So what sort of things would a church need to do in order to be balanced? The place to look for that answer would undoubtedly be in the Bible, right, since that is why they became a church to begin with? To save us some time I kind of cheated by having someone else do some of the homework for us. I went straight to a big theology book that pretty much covers every topic you could imagine on the Bible. I'm using Systematic Theology by Wayne Grudem and lo and behold, there is a chapter on "The Church." They list three primary purposes of the church. First, is worship of God, second, nurturing the believers or teaching them how to live as a Christian in a life that is pleasing to God, and third, reaching out to others outside of the church through evangelism and helping to meet their needs. There are many Scriptures in the Bible to support those three purposes.

For worship, in Colossians 3:16 it says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom, teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts **to the Lord**" and in Ephesians 5:19, "speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart **to the Lord**." The emphasis is of course mine and it is to point out that the worship isn't meant to be just *about the Lord but "to the Lord"*. So, with

those Scriptures in mind, I went looking for examples of worship in the Bible. The first one I'll mention is probably one of the most dramatic examples, found in II Chronicles 5:13-14, "indeed it came to pass, when the trumpeters and singers were **as one**, to make one sound to be heard in praising and **thanking the Lord**, and when they lifted up their voice with the trumpets and cymbals and instruments of music, and praised the Lord, saying: "For He is good, for His mercy endures forever," that the house, the house of the Lord, was filled with a cloud, so that the priests could not continue ministering because of the cloud; for the glory of the Lord filled the house of God." Incredible isn't it? As they all became as **one in worship**, the glory of God filled the temple. As they worshipped to the Lord, they became as one in their worship. They weren't all just doing their own thing, they were all worshipping God together. The Apostle Paul wrote, " in Philippians 2:1-2 " So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any **participation in the Spirit**, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, **being in full accord and of one mind** (ESV). It certainly appears as though being of one accord pleases God, for here is another example in Acts 2:1-4, "When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with **one accord** in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and *one* sat upon each of them. And they were all **filled with the Holy Spirit** and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance " (NKJV).

I don't want to appear presumptuous, but it certainly seems that when God is given the praise and glory by His people who are of one accord, He tends to make an appearance. It would be hard to imagine someone then not wanting to attend such a service where God made an appearance and His glory filled the place. One more thing, Jesus Himself said that God the Father must be worshipped in spirit and truth. "But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth; for the Father is seeking such to worship Him. God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:23-24 NKJV). To explain worshipping God in spirit and truth I went to gotquestions.org where they explained,

"True worship must be "in spirit," that is, engaging the whole heart. Unless there's a real passion for God, there is no worship in spirit. At the same time, worship must be "in truth," that is, properly informed. Unless we have knowledge of the God we worship, there is no worship in truth. Both are necessary for God-honoring worship."

This takes us to the next essential purpose of the church, the nurturing or teaching of the people of the church. Without having the unity and then the foundation of truth instilled in your congregation, there isn't likely to be a worship experience together with the filling of the church with the glory of the Lord. You can be pretty sure about that. It can be as Paul said, "having a form of godliness but denying its power" (II Timothy 3:5). Paul then says in verse 6, "And from such people, turn away!" Paul was speaking of ungodly people who had no intention of glorifying God. If God wants us to not associate with such people then He certainly isn't going to bless their worship. Paul explains the importance of the teaching by saying, "for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the **unity of the faith** and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:12-13 NKJV). It sure is important to God that we are in unity with one another. So much in fact that the last prayer of Jesus' before He was to be crucified on the cross He prayed to God the Father for His disciples but then he prayed, "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that **they all may be one**, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be **one in Us**, that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:20-21).

The third essential purpose of the church is in reaching out to the people in your community. When speaking of evangelism, the Scripture that usually gets mentioned is what is called the Great Commission which is in Matthew 28:18-20. "And Jesus came 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 of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things

that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age” (NKJV). We are all called to be evangelists on some level. But, it is most important to remember what our role is and what responsibility the Holy Spirit has. We are to present and the message of the good news of Jesus Christ. That is it. J. I. Packer in his book, Evangelism & the Sovereignty of God explains it succinctly:

"Evangelism is just preaching the gospel...in which Christians make themselves mouthpieces for God's message of mercy to sinners...the way to tell whether in fact you are evangelizing is not to ask whether conversions are known to have resulted from your witness. it is to ask whether you are faithfully making known the gospel message."

Just as it is the Holy Spirit that brings you into His saving grace to the believing in Jesus Christ as your Redeemer, it is the same for other people as well. That goes also in trusting God that "He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Philippians 1:6). What then goes along with that message is us being an example to others in the work that God has and is doing in us. We will not be perfected until Perfect comes again, that is our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is" (1 John 3:2 NKJV)

When we are worshipping God, He wants us to be in Him as He is in us. In teaching, God is bringing us into the "unity of the faith" that "they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me [Jesus], and I in You; that they also may be **one in Us.**" Did you happen to notice the part in the Great Commission where Jesus said, " lo, I am with you always"? Even in the act of evangelizing, or sharing the gospel message with others Jesus is working towards bringing us together in Him. Yes, even now, God is working toward bringing us all together, in Him. One day God will create a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem. That city is described in Revelation 21:22-27, "But I saw no temple in it, for the **Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.** The city had no need of the sun or of the moon to shine in it, for the glory of God illuminated it. The Lamb is its light. And the nations of those who are saved shall walk in its light, and the kings of the earth

bring their glory and honor into it. Its gates shall not be shut at all by day (there shall be no night there). And they shall bring the glory and the honor of the nations into it. But there shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life." So if you're looking for that perfect church or you know someone else who is, look up, or tell them to, and remember, that we are to be "looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2 NKJV). "For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen (Romans 11:36 NKJV).

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“What does it mean to worship the Lord in spirit and truth?” Got Questions. <https://www.gotquestions.org/worship-spirit-truth.html> (04/13/2020).