

This is the final sermon in our series “Church Matters.” When we began this study two months ago, you may remember that I asked if you knew what a “dinglehopper” is. In reality, it’s a metal fork, which humans use for eating. But in *The Little Mermaid*, when Ariel and Flounder discover one on a sunken ship and have no idea what it’s for, one of their friends makes up a name and a purpose—humans use dinglehoppers, he says, to style their hair. What’s the point? If you don’t know what something is, you have no way of knowing what it does.

Of course, we’ve not been studying forks or Disney movies; we’ve been examining the church. There’s lots of confusion even among Christians today about what the church should be doing in the world and in their own lives. Why? Because they don’t understand what the church is, and as a result, they have no way of knowing what the church does.

Many people assume the church is a rehab clinic for self-improvement, and so they evaluate a church based on what benefits it brings to them and their family. Plenty of others view it as a family values themed theater, and so they come expecting to see a show. Many consider the church to be an education center, so they always expect to learn something new. To some, the church is like a strip mall, where you can get all kinds of spiritual goods and services. Even many pastors today regard the church as a business, so they study management techniques, talk about branding and strategic plans, and measure success based by metrics strangely absent from the Scriptures. It all goes back to what you believe the church IS at its core. ***What we believe the church IS will shape what we think the church DOES.***

Remember what we’ve seen? The church is God’s new humanity, a token of the new world to come. It’s the body of Jesus, with each part organically connected to every other. It’s the modern temple, where God Himself dwells on earth. It’s a holy family, with God as Father and every member belonging forever. It’s the outpost where God’s kingdom has come and His will is done. We are a flock of sheep, chosen, called, protected, and cherished by our Great Shepherd. We are the beloved bride, waiting eagerly for our wedding to Jesus. And we are God’s

firstborn son, dedicated, possessed, redeemed, promised, and kept safe from now until eternity. This, church, is who you are.

Those are all word pictures—concrete representations of different aspects of the church’s identity and mission. Today we’ll try to develop an actual definition. Here’s what we’ll see from our text. The church is a group of people who are:

- United to Christ spiritually
- Committed to one another personally
- Focused on spreading the gospel missionally

United to Christ Spiritually

Acts 4:32 *Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul...*

Notice the radical degrees here: “the *full* number were of *one* heart and soul.” By the way, this is a *huge* church—v4 says the men alone numbered 5,000. But in spite of that huge size, every single person was united in one heart and soul. How is this possible?

Union with Christ. Notice how so many of the metaphors describes our intimate connection with God? His body, His temple, His family, His bride, His son. These are all pictures of what it means to be “in Christ.” And when we are “in Christ,” we are inevitably in close connection with each other. The same transaction that brings us into relationship with God also places us in relationship with all the saints.

2:40-47 *And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, "Save yourselves from this crooked generation." ⁴¹ So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. ⁴² And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. ⁴³ And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all who believed were together and had all things in common. ⁴⁵ And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. ⁴⁶ And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

Notice two things: 1) salvation and baptism automatically triggered people being “added” to the church. 2) Their being added is passive. They didn’t choose it; it just happened. Verse 47 explains how:

2:47 *And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.*

Jesus makes Christians church members, plain and simple. ***Becoming a member outwardly is not what brings you into the church, biblically speaking.*** The Lord adds new Christians to His body the moment they believe. When you join a local church outwardly, physically, publically, you’re simply making visible what is already true. You’re ratifying and solidifying this spiritual reality in your own life. You are already in relationship with God in all these ways. Joining a church simply makes plain what is already true. ***It is another example of the need to live out in your everyday life what has already happened to you in the spiritual realm—growing up into what you’ve already been given.*** Like baptism—you ARE baptized into Christ in the spiritual realm the moment you believe; now you need to get baptized into the church in the visible, physical realm.

What binds us together is our common profession of faith in Christ—the articles we affirm in our church Statement of Faith. These are the truths that unite us spiritually. We don’t all have the same interests, political views, or religious heritage. But we do have this in common. We are one in Christ through our personal affirmation of these basic truths.

[Read SoF together.]

The result? Harmony. A church is united spiritually—“one heart and soul.” See the harmony that results from this kind of union with Christ? ... we have His name (don’t need to make one for ourselves), His past record (don’t have to cover or compensate for ours), His love (don’t have to audition people to see if they are good enough for my approval/acceptance).

Committed to Each Other Personally

vv32-35 *...no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common....³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold*

them and brought the proceeds of what was sold³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

A church has that essential spiritual connection, but its members share something much more: commitment to each other’s complete wellbeing. These early Christians were so devoted to one another, those with financial means literally shared their wealth with those in need. BTW, we should be clear on what is NOT happening here. This is not a mandatory form of Christian communism. Couple evidences:

1. Verse 34 says “there was not a needy person among them” rather than “not a wealthy person.” In other words, those with means did not necessarily divest themselves of all their money so that they were all equally well off.
2. Peter’s comments to Ananias in 5:4 indicate that this practice was voluntary.

So I conclude that verse 32 describes their *attitude* toward each other and their possessions: “no one said his things were his own.”

Here’s the clear point: Church is not the building where we meet: “Let’s redecorate the church for Christmas.” It is not even this meeting: “I really enjoyed church today.” Church is something we ARE—family, kingdom outpost, body, flock. Being the church is not only committing to the same doctrine; it’s committing to one another—commitments we spell out in our church covenant.

A church covenant is a series of written pledges based on the Bible regarding our moral, spiritual, and relational commitments to God and each other. NOTE: It’s not a biblical imperative to have a church covenant, but there seems to be a covenantal framework to the relationships described in the NT. In their letters to the churches, the apostles apply certain responsibilities to each other as though these things are just understood. They are “givens” of life in the NC community.

[Read PHBF Covenant together.] This is the mutual agreement we’ve made to walk together as the people of God.

Result: Security. At Parker Hills, we take seriously our responsibility to watch out for each other and care for each other spiritually, relationally,

and physically. We do everything humanly possible to make sure our members prosper and their life is blessed.

Focused on Spreading the Gospel Missionally

vv29-31 *"...And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, ³⁰ while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." ³¹ And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.*

v33 *And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.*

What motivated them to maintain unity spiritually and care for one another personally? They knew their community existed for a higher purpose than just the community itself. They were together for the gospel, not just for the sake of community. They knew that their purpose was to advance the fame of Jesus' name and the domain of His kingdom on the earth.

The profound unity in this church came about, not by being unity conscious, but by being Christ conscious, gospel conscious, mission conscious. It's about looking away from our longing for unity and our need for community and instead mobilizing for mission.

We are salt and light—two metaphors we didn't cover but which apply to us as a community as much as individuals (cf. Rev 1:12 – churches as lampstands). In other words, mission is part of our identity first, then a function we perform.

Our church mission statement: "Jesus Christ: to know Him and make Him known for the glory of God and the joy of all peoples."

Result: Priority

What is a church?

- United spiritually, producing harmony
- Committed personally, fostering security

- Focused missionally, maintaining priority

CONCLUSION: What often appears weak and trifling to us may be great and glorious to God.

- Abraham
- David
- the gospel
- the church