

Back to Basics Part 3

As part of our back to basics emphasis our focus today is on the church. Who and what is the church? Why is the church so important? Can I be a Christian without involving myself with a church? Good questions and we will try to deal with them this morning and then we will be receiving new members at the close of the service.

The word church gets used in a variety of ways. We talk about “going to church” and we are typically referring to the building in which we meet. We say this building we are in is a church. We talk about “having church.” “Do you all still have church on Sunday night?” We are then talking about a particular service and what we do when we all get together in this place. The truth is, **We are the church!** Wherever we meet, whatever we do, how ever we conduct a service, we are the church.

The word church comes from the Greek word *ekklesia* which means “called out ones”. It means to call a group together – called out and gathered together. **The church is the people of God, called out of sin and the world and gathered to Christ in a new community of faith.**

The church is the gathering of those who are followers of the Lord Jesus Christ – all those united with him and with each other through salvation and baptism into Christ.

The New Testament writers use a number of different ways to speak of the church and illustrate who we are. Peter spoke of us as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession.” 1 Peter 2:9-10. He refers to the church as a “spiritual house built out of living stones.” Paul speaks of the church as the family of God. God is our Father and has adopted us as his very own. Paul also compares the relationship between Christ and the church to the relationship between husband and wife. Jesus is the heavenly bridegroom and the church is like his bride. Perhaps the most frequently used metaphor for the church is the body of Christ. He is the head and we are members of his body, joined together and functioning together in love. If you want to look further at the ways the bible speaks of the church, I recommend a book I wrote entitled, *Without Spot or Wrinkle*.

This morning I want to focus on a few thoughts about the importance of the church in the life of a follower of Christ. First understand, you become a part of the church, the body of Christ, at salvation. When you repent of your sins and receive Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord, you become part of the church. You don’t join the church, you are joined to the church –

joined to Christ and to the people of God by the Holy Spirit. You become a part of the body of Christ, the family of God.

People are joining Carbondale Assembly this morning, but they are already part of THE church, the universal church, the invisible, holy, catholic, apostolic (whatever words you use to describe it) church. This morning they are publicly identifying as members of this particular church, but they are already part of THE church.

So if I'm already made a part of the church when I got saved, why do I need to show up here all the time? Why is attending church so important? Keep this in mind: this wasn't my idea. Preachers didn't invent the church to keep you busy. **Jesus instituted the church.** This was his idea, not ours. I'm sure in many ways what we've made of his church is not what he had in mind but Jesus instituted the church. We are God's new community and he is still building his church. Jesus said, **"I will build my church and the gates of Hell will not overcome it."** **Matthew 16:18** The church is his idea and he is building it the way he wants it and his idea is that we have to meet together.

His church is about relationships. Remember: called out and gathered together. The verse we just quoted in Matthew 16 happened when Peter confessed, "You are the Christ, the Son of God." In response, Jesus didn't say, "Good. Your confession means you are born again so be at peace, you're on your own." Instead, Jesus announced his plan to build the church. His response to our confession of faith is to bring us into the church! We are to be the saints of God called out of sin and gathered together, not the saints of God divided, independent and alone.

"Okay, I get it. I get saved and I'm made to be part of this invisible, spiritual thing we call the church. But do I really need to be part of this visible church?" Let me answer that question with another question. **Does a newborn need a family?** Best case scenario we would say "Yes". Why? The newborn needs someone to care for them, to nurture and love them, to teach them, to protect them, to model for them what living is all about, to hold them accountable. We wouldn't leave the baby to find her own way, to figure it out on her own. The same can be said for a newborn believer in Jesus. That's one of the reasons Jesus brings us to the church when he saves us. We need the church. **We need the family of God.** We can't make it on our own.

The pattern was established in Acts 2 on the Day of Pentecost. 3,000 people were saved and baptized. Peter didn't say, "Pray and ask God to teach you whatever you need to know. Good luck and God bless. Be careful on your way home." Instead, these new converts were thrust into the life of the church. The very next verse says, **"They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer."** Acts 2:42. Here we are, along with the Acts 2 believers – the church gathered, studying the apostles' teaching (the bible), sharing our lives together in fellowship, celebrating communion together in the breaking of bread, and praying and worshiping God together.

We need those things. You see, something spiritual happens when we gather together. **The invisible church becomes visible, in part, any time believers gather.** Jesus said, **"For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."** Matthew 18:20. Jesus is with us when we gather and in his name, the church visibly fleshes out the ministry of Christ. At least it should! The church gathered offers visible expressions of forgiveness, of mercy shown and gifts shared. Jesus said the world would know we are Christians by our love. I would hope the other members of his body would know the same. You see, those things we teach about love, forgiveness and mercy, those aren't just theological words, they aren't just characteristics of the invisible church; they are to be the fleshed out reality of the visible church.

You hear me say it when I dedicate babies. I pray the child will know what love and forgiveness is because he or she will see it modeled in the way mom and dad treat each other. The church is the family of God and we are supposed to live together in such a way that all of us, the new believer and follower of Christ and the world will see love and forgiveness and patience and kindness and faithfulness modeled and fleshed out in the visible church. It is our responsibility and our duty as believers to live as the people of God, the family of God.

As surely as a baby needs a family, we need the family of God to nurture us, to care for us, to love and protect us, to hold us accountable. We won't make it without a family and we won't make it without a church family. You won't grow healthy in Christ without the church.

"Ok. I need the church. But can I just meet with a couple of believers for coffee and not bother with all this Sunday service stuff?" While there is something to be said for good conversation and being well-caffeinated, I think we need more than that. That's not all there is to being part of the church.

We've already said from the Acts 2 pattern that the life of the church involves not only fellowship, but also studying the word of God, privately and corporately, breaking of bread in communion and prayer. I think it calls for gathering together. Let me tell you why I think you need to attend this church and these services (or some church where these things happen.)

The Word of God is publicly proclaimed. You need to study the bible on your own, but you also need to hear it explained, preached, taught by others. We need the perspective shared by others who are faithfully studying God's word. When essentially all the voices of culture and media are anti-Christian and opposed to biblical teachings and ethics, we need to know what God's word has to say. I believe the sermons you hear are biblical, prophetic. They call us to obedience and service to Christ. They give a biblical context to the events and seasons of our life. I've been a part of this church for almost 50 years. My spiritual life and knowledge has been shaped and informed by the teaching/preaching ministry of this church.

Corporate worship and prayer. God inhabits the praises of his people. There is something life giving and spiritually encouraging and refreshing when we lift our voices together in worship, praise and prayer. Some of the most spiritually eventful moments of my life have happened in times of worship and prayer in this church.

Nurturing fellowship. You are part of a caring, loving fellowship in this church. I have watched as this church has stood by people in the worst situations of life, showing mercy, grace, giving practical and spiritual help, aid, assistance. This church has stood by me in the toughest seasons of my life. We will stand by you as well. You need the church and we need you!

Outward vision. This church doesn't exist only for itself. Long ago we embraced the commandment to go into all the world and make disciples. This church gives, sends, and goes to meet the spiritual and physical needs of others. This is a place of healing, hope, laughter and peace. Don't you need that? It happens as we gather and serve God, one another and the world.

The bible tells us in Ephesians 4 that part of the life and ministry of the gathered church is **“to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up...and become mature...Then...speaking the truth in love, we will...grow up into him who is the Head, that is Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every**

supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.”

Ephesians 4:12-16

God gathers us, the body of Christ, and we are connected to one another, joined and held together by every supporting ligament Paul said. Each part does its work. We share our gifts, our abilities and talents and resources and as we do the body functions the way it should, blessing and helping others, proclaiming the gospel of Christ. We are better when we are all doing our part and that is better facilitated when we gather regularly and faithfully.

So what does that mean? That means you are needed here. All the time? Well, I think Sunday morning is pretty important. You need to hear the word of God proclaimed, you need to have the opportunity to pray with others and to be prayed for. You need the experience of corporate worship and prayer. Besides that, you need to join with others in publicly, faithfully, consistently proclaiming that Jesus is risen, alive and worthy of our worship and praise!

We need the discipline of regular church attendance. Jesus is still building his church and we are the materials he is using. We need to be available for his use. Besides, the bible says, **“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”** Hebrews 10:25

You aren't just here to get something, you are here to give something and minister to others. Because we are told to share our gifts with each other and encourage one another and fellowship with each other, we recognize that the Sunday morning service alone won't accomplish that. We need smaller groups where we can share our hurts and hopes, where we can pray for one another. Is there someone that knows you and your needs well enough to pray for you? Is there someone in the church that you know their needs well enough to pray for them? That happens in smaller groups, like the Life Groups, Sunday School. So as part of the church you need to find a way to connect with others. You will likely have to be intentional about that. It probably won't happen if you avoid making eye contact with everyone. Try talking to someone. Try going to Sunday School. Sign up for a Life Group. Come on Wednesday and eat dinner and meet someone new. Look for someone that looks like they could use a friend or a word of encouragement. Don't just come looking to get your needs met, look to meet other's needs.

“Well, I’ve been in churches before and I got hurt. Can I be a Christian and not attend church?” Let me answer with another question. Can you be married and not live with your spouse? Yes you can, but it’s not much of a marriage. To be a Christian, a follower of Christ is to be a part of his body, the church. You are a part, whether you attend services or not. The problem is, without attending the services, without connecting with other members of the body of Christ, you miss out on the blessings and growth that results from being with one another.

“Yes but church is messy. I’ve been hurt in a church before. People disappoint me.” I know. Life is messy. But think about it like a marriage. “I’m married, but I don’t want to live with that person because I’m afraid we might argue. If I get too close to my spouse, if I find out too much about her and really get close to her, I might get hurt. I just don’t want to be disappointed so I’m going to stay married, but I just won’t live with her. Marriage is too messy.”

You might get hurt, but you also might get blessed. You might also have someone to share your life with, to laugh with, to help you bear your burdens, to cry with you, to hold you when you are hurting, to nurse you when you are sick. The blessings of marriage are worth the risk and the blessings of the church are worth the risk as well.

Is the church perfect? Of course not because we are all in it! The late Chuck Colson in his book *The Body* wrote, **“As has been said, the church is like Noah’s ark: the stench inside would be unbearable if it weren’t for the storm outside. This is the church we have. And as imperfect... as we find it at times, we need to acknowledge that it is through this church...that truth is being proclaimed and portrayed.”** ...Chuck Colson

You need the church and the church needs you. You are a part of that invisible church as a believer and follower of Christ. But Jesus also loves and acknowledges the visible church and says you are to be a part of it. That means we need to support it, embrace it, participate in the life of the church, share our gifts and talents and resources, pray for it, speak well of it because this is his church and it is your church!

We are receiving members into this visible expression of His church today. As I read your names, please come forward. I’ll read the whole list even though some are in the other service.

We are pleased to welcome you to the family of Carbondale Assembly of God. You are

part of God's family as a believer in Jesus, and we are grateful that you have chosen to be part of our family and fellowship as well. This is your church now. We need you and your gifts and talent and ability and you need us and what we offer. Together we can accomplish so much more and be so much more than we can by ourselves. We are blessed to have you as part of our church and I believe you will be blessed by being a part of this body as well.

I've been reading this statement to new members for many years now, paraphrased from something Jerry Cook wrote in his book, *Love Acceptance and Forgiveness* –

“I want you to know that we are committed to you. You'll never knowingly suffer at our hands. We will never say or do anything, knowingly, to hurt you. We will always in every circumstance seek to help you and support you. If you're down and we can lift you up, we'll do that. Anything we have that you need, we'll share with you and if need be, we'll give it to you. No matter what we find out about you and no matter what happens in the future, either good or bad, our commitment to you will never change. And there's nothing you can do about it. You don't have to respond. We love you and that's what it means.” Let's pray.

On behalf of the members and elders of Carbondale Assembly of God, we welcome you into our fellowship. This is your church. We love you and we are here for you. I'm going to ask the pastors and deacons and spouses to come greet these new members and I encourage you to greet them and make a point to get to know them as well. Let's show our love and acceptance of them and welcome them by a round of applause.