

church

a ten-part series
parts 1-3



Study 1: What is the church?

Getting Started

What is the best jigsaw puzzle you've ever done or seen? If you were given a thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle, what would be the best thing you could have to ensure you complete it well?

Read and Reflect

There is a consistent pattern in the New Testament where the authors portray the church as the forerunner to the gathering of all of God's people at the end of time.

Read Ephesians 1:10

Importantly, the church began after Christ's resurrection and the sending of the Spirit. It looks forward to the time when all of God's purified saints will gather around his throne.

Read Rev 7:9-10

1) If the church in the NT points forward, how should this shape our understanding of the church today?

2) Can we properly know what the church is meant to be today if we don't know what its end is meant to look like? Why/why not?

3) How does the Westminster Confession's depiction of the church in XXV.1 acknowledge this forward looking dimension?

“The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that fills all in all.”

Read Revelation 21:1-4

4) How do we know this is a picture of the church?

5) What is the picture of the church given in these verses?

6) How is this a fulfilment of Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17:21?

7) 1 John 1:3 gives us a sense of how we experience this mutual indwelling now. How will it be different in the end times?

The church Father Ignatius said, “Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the universal church.” Irenaeus said, “Where the Spirit of God is, there is the church, and all grace.”

8) What do you think these early church fathers are talking about?

9) How can we tell that the Spirit has worked to create a church?

Reformers such as John Calvin and Heinrich Bullinger argued that the marks of a true church were the correct teaching of the word of God and the right administration of the sacraments (Baptism and the Lord’s Supper).

10) Why do you think they centred on these things?

In Practice

11) If you were visiting a new church what sort of things would you want to know about it to determine if it was a true church or not? What would be danger signs for you?

Study 2: We are the Church

Getting Started

Have you ever tried a sample of a dish that a supermarket is trying to sell the ingredients for? Let's say a Penne Pork dish. Is the bite that you take Penne Pork? Is it part of the Penne Pork? How does it relate to the version that the celebrity chef originally designed?

These questions might not seem related to the church at first, but as we'll see trying to figure out what the local church is compared to the universal church, compared to the final gathering of God's people is a little like figuring out our Penne Pork problem. Let's dig in.

Read and Reflect

Last week we mentioned the early church Father Ignatius' quote, "Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the universal church."

1) How do you think this connects to Matt 18:20?

Matthew 18:20 has a long history of being *the* passage that our understanding of what constitutes a church.

2) Do you agree with the statement "Where two or three are gathered in Christ's name, not only is Christ present among them, but a Christian church is there as well, perhaps a bad church, a church that may well transgress against love and truth, but a church nonetheless." (Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p136) Why/Why not?

Often today when we speak of church we are referring to a building or a service ('Church starts at 10am'). But that is not what the word 'church' properly means. The church is first of all an assembly of people ('where two or three are *gathered* in my name'). Assembly is the literal translation of the Greek word *ekklesia* which we normally translate as 'church'.

The church has been described as 'a visible assembly, of visible persons, at a specific place for specific action.' (Otto Weber, *Versammelte Gemeinde*, 32)

**3) Is the church only a church however when it is gathered together?
Why/ why not?**

The New Testament does confirm the understanding of the church as an assembled community. The use of the word *ekklesia* in the NT refers almost exclusively to concrete gatherings of Christians at a specific place. Even though the church is always 'the church of *God*' (1 Cor 1:2) in each occasion it is a church of a specific people at a specific place, eg. The church of the Thessalonians or the church of the Laodiceans (1 Thess 1:1, 2 Thess 1:1)

4) How is this further confirmed by Acts 9:31 and 20:38?

5) How does Romans 12:5 and 1 Cor 12:12-13 also confirm this idea?

6) But, why can the church (*ekklesia*) not just be the visible local church gathering? Cf Eph 1:22; 2:22; 3:10; 5:22-33; Col 1:18.

**7) What is the thing that links any local church to the church universal?
Cf 2 Cor 1:22, Eph 1:14**

The church then is ‘the people of God’ in a local sense and a universal sense. But there is another way of thinking about different categories of the church. Historically this distinction has come to be known as the difference between the ‘invisible church’ and the ‘visible church’.

The WCF defines the invisible church as “the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fulness of Him that fills all in all.”

The visible church meanwhile is defined by the WCF as “catholic or universal under the Gospel (not confined to one nation, as before under the law), consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.”

8) What are the differences between these two categories?

9) Could a person be a member of the visible church but not the invisible church?

So some people who make up the visible church now (both locally and universally) might not be part of the invisible church. **10) What does this mean for the idea that the church today is looking forward to the new creation?**

In Practice

Sometimes we speak of having a kingdom mentality when it comes to ministry rather than just having a particular interest in our own church.

11) How does this relate to the difference between the local and universal church?

Study 3: A Confessing Church

Getting Started

Let's say you were in a kind of rough Rabbitoh's pub, and you had some friends with you who were Sea Eagles fans. Would you doubt their fandom if they refused to admit which team they went for? What if they didn't know anything about the Sea Eagles? Would you call them a fan?

What we say we believe, and how we act, is important in determining who we are and what we are connected to. Game on.

Read and Reflect

A church is a gathering or an assembly, but not every gathering is a church. What is indispensable for a church to be a church is that it is an assembly gathered *in the name of Christ*. "...where two or three are gathered *in my name*, I am there among them." (Matt 18:20)

1) Who is the person who defines the church over any other? How do you think this relates to his name in Matt 1:32?

The church is 'the church of God' but more specifically whose church is it? Romans 16:16 Cf. Gal 1:22. **2) What is the significance of the church being the church of Christ, rather than the church of the Spirit or the church of the Father?**

3) Seeing as we are the church of Christ, why is it important to distinguish between Jesus Christ and another Jesus? Cf. 2 Cor 11:4

4) What is the role of doctrine (beliefs) in the church?

When we gather in the name of Christ, we are gathering to personally identify ourselves with him. But we must believe correct things about Jesus if we are to correctly identify ourselves with him. Most basically, we confess that Jesus is our Lord and saviour (Rom 10:9-13) when we gather in his name.

5) Is confession only an act of the mouth though when it comes to Jesus?

6) Is confession only a private affair? (Matt 10:32-33)

7) What is the value of confessing faith to one another? How do we do this? (think about your own personal life as well as the life of the congregation).

8) Given the public nature of confession, what are the benefits of pre formulated confessions like the Apostle's Creed or the Nicene Creed?

9) Has confession of Christ truly taken place if there is no faith in the heart of the person saying the words?

Two ways that we confess our faith in Christ is through the Baptism and the Lord's Supper. These are part of the essential nature of the church. In church history, there has never been a time without baptism or the Lord's Supper. Through baptism, a person is initiated into the church, and through the Lord's Supper a person lives as part of the church. These rites are called sacraments, or means of grace. They are active ways that we experience God's grace to us. In this way, we can also say that where there is no baptism and Lord's Supper, there is no church.

10) How do you think we normally see baptism and the Lord's Supper. Be real. How does this understanding of them change your opinion of them? Does it?

11) Do you think it's true that where there is no baptism or the Lord's Supper there is no church?

In Practice

12) What should our approach be to the Lord's Supper and baptism? How would you explain to a new Christian what these sacraments mean?

Mission Statement

Enabling people by God's Grace to become complete followers
of Jesus Christ

Vision Statement

Our vision at Gosford Presbyterian Church is to glorify God by being a
strong gospel and bible teaching church and prayerfully -

Welcoming: we will thoughtfully, sensitively and inclusively invite
people into the community of faith and give them a sense of belonging

Strengthening: we will strengthen people in their knowledge and
understanding of Jesus

Supporting: we will support each other by sharing our lives and
following Jesus together

Serving: we will serve Jesus through daily submission to Him

Equipping: we will equip people to tell the gospel, make disciples and
be effective leaders