

What Is the Purpose of the Church?

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[0 : 00] This morning we begin a new series of sermons we've been talking about where we are going to go through scripture seeking an answer to the question of what is the purpose for the church.

! And we'll be doing that in January and then into February with a shift in focus to what is the purpose of church membership. And so this sermon really serves as an introduction to what the messages will be about throughout the rest of this month.

And it's a little different for me because I'm used to taking one text and just preaching from that one. But this morning and also I'm sure as we go through this study it will be a little different as we survey many different texts in order to answer this important question.

And so while I don't have one main preaching text this morning I will be using many but how about you go ahead and turn in your Bibles to Acts chapter 2. I am going to talk about this this morning. Acts chapter 2 verse 37 through 41 which records the birth of the church.

[1 : 36] Acts chapter 2 verse 37 through 41. If you have your Bible go ahead and turn there. If you don't have a Bible go ahead and turn there. If you don't have a Bible there are Bibles in the pews.

If you don't own a Bible please take that Bible home with you today as a gift from our congregation to you in hopes that you'll continue to read the word of God. So would you please stand with me as we honor God's word together reading from Acts chapter 2 verse 37 through 41.

Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles. Brothers what shall we do? And Peter said to them repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins.

And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off. Everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself.

And with many other words he bore witness and continued to exhort them saying save yourselves from this crooked generation. So those who received his word were baptized and those were added that day and there were added that day about 3,000 souls.

[2 : 54] We got a blessing to the reading of his word. Would you please be seated? When I was a teenager in church our youth group did a play.

And the play we sold tickets to people in the church and it was used as a fundraiser for one of our mission trips. And the name of the play was The First Church of Pete's Garage.

The First Church of Pete's Garage. And so the main character obviously is Pete. Pete is an idealistic young man who has become increasingly disgruntled with his church over time.

He perceives a lot of problems within his church. Problems that he feels like need to be corrected and dealt with. And he feels that his concerns also and his needs are being ignored by the adults in the church.

So Pete makes a bold decision. He leaves his church in the belief that he is capable of starting and sustaining a much better one.

[4 : 09] He is pleased at first to be joined by others from his church, primarily other teenagers, who are likewise dissatisfied as he is. And collectively they form a new church that meets in his garage.

However, it doesn't take long for young Pete to realize that many of the same issues that plagued his previous church had infiltrated his new one.

Everyone had a different opinion. Everyone had a different purpose for what they thought the church should be and how the church should carry out that purpose.

And so the play ends with Pete's ideal church in shambles. He concludes that there is no perfect church and that it is better to join and commit himself with other believers, bearing with them impatience, compassion, kindness, and love as they pursue a better place of worship together.

It was a good play. It was fun. The first church of Pete's garage, though, obviously is satire. Certainly if you're a disgruntled teen within our church, we would like to hear from you and talk with you.

[5 : 29] Please don't start a church in your garage. It pokes fun, though, at the issues that we know are prevalent in our churches. Everyone has an opinion of what their ideal church is.

Their ideal based upon how long they think the sermon should be or what the style of the music should be or where the church should meet. Everyone also places different emphasis on what they think the priority of evangelism or missions or the different other programs within the church, what should be prioritized above others.

Though we've been saved by the same Savior and we trust in the same gospel, we often disagree about when the church should meet, where the church should meet, what the style, again, of the worship service should be, and who should lead the church.

We also have disagreements about when we should have communion, who can administer communion, who should be baptized, when should they be baptized, and who should baptize them. What translation of the Bible are we going to use?

And we could go on and on and on, couldn't we? Oftentimes these disagreements, though, unfortunately, lead churches to split.

[6 : 52] And it leads them to split because these kinds of disagreements cloud their understanding of what the purpose of the church truly is.

We pursue our ideal church based upon what we think it should be. Oftentimes, don't we? But how often do we stop to think, well, what's wrong with that?

Well, what's wrong with it is that you'll never find it. You'll never find your ideal church, even if, like Pete, you seek to establish your own church.

Many of you guys have probably heard the illustration of the man who has been discovered on a deserted island, and he's been a castaway for many years, and some ship stumbles upon him, and they find this man, and he's thin, and he's survived, however.

But the sailors who discover him realize that he's got three huts. Heard this story? So they ask him, what are those three huts? And he says, well, the first one is my house, the second one is my church, and the third one is where I used to go to church.

[8 : 11] I'm surprised that got such a good laugh. I felt like everybody has heard that one. But it's true, isn't it? I mean, even if it's you establishing your own church, eventually even you are going to find something wrong with it that will disgruntle you.

I believe that discouragement within the church often results from a lack of understanding of its God's given purpose. When that purpose isn't communicated or understood well enough, a church then loses its way, and personal preference determines the level of commitment of the congregation.

And so it was almost a year ago, it was before COVID really hit hard, that we were in an elders meeting, and the elders of our church were discussing how we all have this desire to see an increased level of commitment within our congregation.

We have a desire to see them grow more mature in their faith and as a believer of Jesus Christ.

And so this great desire that the leaders of our church have had is a wonderful thing for our church because it is and was, I should say, the desire of the Apostle Paul.

If you look at Colossians 1, 28 through 29, him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ.

[9 : 55] For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. This is a good thing. And so that's part of the reason why, main reason why, these sermons are going to talk about the purpose of the church.

And then we'll move on to the talking about the purpose of church membership because our hope is that in understanding the purpose of the church and membership, the result will be a church where we are spurning one another on towards spiritual maturity and growth and becoming more like Jesus Christ and being used by him in greater ways.

So how can this be achieved? What is the best process for the accomplishment of this? Well, I think, again, the starting place is to be reminded of what the purpose of the church is.

And down in my office, I have many books in my shelves that many of them refer to different subjects that deal with the church. I have church administration books.

I have church revitalization books. I have church planning books. I have books that focus on the church's evangelism and mission and outreach efforts. And while many of them are helpful, ultimately, the answer to the question that we are looking for is found in just one book. [11 : 21] And it's the Bible. And that's the main idea for this morning's sermon. The Bible contains the answers we need to determine what and who the church is.

The Bible contains the answers we need to determine what and who the church is. Everything we know about God and His will comes not from our personal opinions or feelings or preferences, but from His own self-revelation.

We know the good news of Jesus Christ because God has revealed His truth about Himself to us through Him. And He has done this also primarily through His Word, which is the Bible.

The truth of Christ is the means God's Spirit uses to reconcile us to Himself. New life comes from the Word or through the Word, and the Word keeps us focused on what truly matters.

And this is what Jesus prayed for us in John chapter 17, verses 20 through 21, that high priestly prayer. Look at what He said.

[12 : 36] Listen to what He prayed. I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe. That's speaking of us. Believe in Me through their Word, that they may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that You have sent Me.

So did you see a couple of things there? They're really important for us to understand. Jesus acknowledged that it would be through the preaching and the teaching and the sharing of His Word by His disciples that would make new disciples, more disciples, and that this Word, this message, would also unite them collectively to the Father through Christ the Son, resulting in a unity that impacts the world, displaying the reality to the world, to unbelievers, that Christ has come.

And then with that, an opportunity for the church to share with the world about Christ's coming and what it has accomplished for sinful mankind.

We see the beginning of our Lord's Prayer being fulfilled in the New Testament when on the day of Pentecost, recorded in Acts chapter 2, after Jesus has ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit descended, filling His followers in Jerusalem, and they began sharing the gospel in many different languages.

And people from all over the region were visiting Jerusalem at that time and were miraculously hearing the gospel being shared in their native language. This obviously was something that amazed them, but it also perplexed them.

[14 : 36] It perplexed them, and some of them presumed that the believers pronouncing the gospel in these foreign languages must be drunk. And then Peter stands up.

And what does Peter do? Peter preaches. What does Peter preach? Peter preaches the Word of God as he explained the scriptures, as he shared the gospel with all those who were gathered.

We've read it already. Let's read it again. We see what the outcome was beginning in verse 37.

Now when they heard this, they heard Peter preaching the Word of God.

It cut them to the heart. And said to Peter, they said to Peter, and the rest of the apostles, brothers, what shall we do? And Peter said to them, repent and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

For the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to himself. And with many other words, he bore witness and continued to exhort them, saying, save yourselves from this crooked generation.

[15 : 54] So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about 3,000 souls. Pretty good day. The church was born in that moment.

And in this chapter, we also see a pattern established as churches were planted and instituted in different communities and cultures.

As churches are formed and founded throughout the book of Acts, we see and we witness continually it's the word of God proclaimed that accomplishes it, as it did in Acts 2.

Because why? God's word convicts, it saves, and it multiplies. God's word builds his church. God's word establishes his church.

God's word strengthens his church. God's word equips his church to accomplish his purposes.

Therefore, Paul can boldly state in Romans 10, 17, so faith comes from hearing and hearing through the word of Christ.

[17:12] The word preached and empowered by the Spirit creates new life and sustains that life and it causes that life to grow.

The word of God is then the church's lifeline, anchoring us in its truth and guiding our path forward. In 2 Timothy, Paul, having received or having reached the end of his life, he writes to Timothy, a young pastor whom he has mentored.

Paul knows that his ministry is coming to an end, but Timothy's ministry will continue to carry on for years to come. And so he leaves him with some very important instruction that will be critical to this young pastor for the health of himself and for the development of the church whom he pastors. And he keeps them, keeps him mindful here, Paul does to Timothy, of his and their purpose. 2 Timothy 3, 16, 4 through 2.

Paul says, All scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

[18:32] I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ who is to judge the living and the dead and by his appearing of his kingdom, preach the word. Be ready in season and out of season.

Reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience and teaching. So, if we are going to answer this question, what is the purpose of the church correctly and see fruit, result from our study, it must be our Bibles that we look to for the answer.

The Bible, again, is the primary source of our instruction and it has much to say about the church for the church. God's word will instruct, reveal, and remind us of what the purpose of his church is. And so, again, this series of sermons will seek to do just that. Reconfirming, rediscovering, and reestablishing what the church is to be and do based upon the instruction found for it in God's word. To be a healthy, vibrant congregation that makes disciples and that has an impact that lasts until the Lord returns, we must understand and trust and obey and submit to God's word that God's word will accomplish that.

[20:08] God's word is foundational to his church and are joyfully accepting it and applying it and adopting it will bring his blessings. Isaiah 55, 10 through 11, God says, for as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth making it bring forth and sprout giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth.

It shall not return to me empty. but it shall accomplish what I purpose and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. These are promises.

God's word is powerful. And so I anticipate that the time we spend invested in answering this question from scripture will see a great return.

Not because of who we are but because of who God is. So today we embark on a study that again and I believe God will use to prepare us for what he has in store for us.

Today's sermon serves as an introduction in preparing us to answer the question of the church's purpose. And in order to get us started in the right direction I think we first need to establish a framework from scripture by addressing and answering two questions that will put us on track to rediscovering what the purpose of our church is.

[21:40] And the first question is what is the church? What is the church? Now if somebody handed you a piece of paper and a pencil and they asked you to draw a church what would you draw?

A building wouldn't you? That's what I would have done if somebody did that to me and you know it would be a little a box and a triangle and a cross on top.

Now some of you are better artists than others but if somebody asked you to do that you think if we asked one of our children hey draw us a picture of a church they would draw a picture of a building because when we think of the church we think of a building and that's understandable I think because at least in our culture for centuries Christians have occupied buildings where they meet for worship however the Bible does not define the church as a brick and mortar building the word church is a translation of the Greek word ecclesia which is defined as an assembly or called out ones or an assembly of called out ones the root meaning of ecclesia or church doesn't have to do with a building at all but with people a people and even though many of us know this it hasn't stopped us from associating or defining the church with a building if someone asked you where do you go to church and you answered

Highland Park Baptist Church and then they asked you where is it you would give them the address of our building wouldn't you and maybe even describe the building I've done this it's behind Soho across from the hospital oh yeah I know where that's at we usually don't answer that question like this when they ask where do you go to church well I belong to Highland Park Baptist Church and we meet for worship in a building located on 300 Southeast Washington Boulevard or if someone asked you if you know someone who is a part of your church you'd say something like yeah we go to church together we associate our church and our belonging to a church with a building that we go to more than we realize the early church met in many different locations often they met in the homes of one of their church members many churches today have sought to return back to that model meeting in homes to follow that example certainly found in scripture but we've got to understand from what

I've read there is no biblical mandate or command to follow that model we aren't commanded either to have a building in scripture but we're not commanded not to have one I think there's benefit to both having one or not having one but the point is that scripture says the church is a people not a physical location the Bible uses the metaphor of a body not a building in describing what the church is look at Ephesians 1 22 through 23 and he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things the church referring to Christ which is his body the fullness of him who fills all in all the church is his body this metaphor of a church being likened to a body illustrates the unity that we have as believers to Christ and the unity we also have to one another in Christ scripture refers to the church as one body in Christ in Romans 12 5 one body in 1st

[26 : 30] Corinthians 10 17 the body of Christ in 1st Corinthians 12 27 and Ephesians 4 12 and the body in Hebrews 13 3 you see a body is a unit consisting of many different parts which have many different functions but each member is controlled by the head and the head of the body is Christ when Christ entered the world in his incarnation he took on a physical body prepared for him scripture says through his physical body Jesus demonstrated the love of God clearly tangibly and boldly especially through his sacrificial death on the cross then after his bodily resurrection and ascension Christ continues his work in this world through those whom he has redeemed whom he has called out and through them he continues to demonstrate the love of God clearly tangibly and boldly in this way the church today functions as his body and so in answering this question who is the church

I believe that as we've seen through scripture here the church is a people not a building the church is a people not a building who are joined to the body of Christ by their common salvation as the body of Christ each member serves each member serves a role in collectively pursuing and accomplishing the mission will and desire of its head who is Jesus Christ so who is the church it's not a building it's not a building that you go to it's a body that you are a part of it's a body that you are a part of through faith in Christ's bodily crucifixion and resurrection you have been eternally placed within his body and with other born again believers as well to collectively serve as one unit fulfilling the will of the head who is

Jesus Christ for which we have been called when you have been made a part of this body this body of Jesus Christ you are a part of this organization forever you know I I'd heard that in the mafia right when you become a member of the mafia what do they tell you you're in for life meaning that you know there's no escape if you try to get out of this you're dead right okay we're not the mafia thankfully but we are a supernatural organization and listen once you've been put in this body you're you're not getting out thank God for that but listen a part of that too when you've been placed in this body you've been placed in this body with other believers and we are stuck together forever we understand that we are stuck together forever now maybe that disturbs you but hopefully it won't when we get to heaven and we're the sin nature is completely done away with we will be thankful that we've been placed together in this body forever but understand that we're going to be together eternally we're going to be together eternally and so why would we not seek to know one another better we're going to spend eternity together we should know each other better than we know the ins and outs of our building than we know where you know everything is we need to care for one another more than we care about this building because listen this building will one day no longer be but this body will live eternally and so we need to care for one another more than we care about this building the pharisees if you recall were guilty of honoring preserving and loving their traditions and the temple more than they loved the people whom they were supposed to serve you remember the disciples were marveling over the construction of the temple and what did Jesus tell them it's going

to be rubble one day rubble there's more important things love your neighbor love god how tragic it would be if we followed though the example of the pharisees today we should care about this building i don't want you to get me wrong we should care about this building but our caring of it should be a reflection of the love that we have for christ the love that we have for one another and the desire that we collectively have to see god glorified by this church that meets in this building and so we need to change our perspective of what the church is in order to better understand its purpose and i don't even want to pretend like this is going to be really easy to do because you know i think of my home church back in kansas city and there's an attachment there there's a strong attachment there i don't know many of the people who still go to church there but whenever we're in town we drive by that building there is an attachment there and the attachment is because i'm think i thank god for what i've learned there for the relationships that i've established there but it's a building i think we can do this with our houses too can't we you lived in a house for so long there's this attachment there's a strong attachment there and so we need to pray that god would help us to do this just revealing it i don't think it's going to to break that attachment but i hope that as we go through this as we pray along through it we will see that you know the church is the people not the building we need a change of mind that sees the church as a people who have been united together with christ a people not a building that we belong to and so i hope that maybe in the time comes when we see each other out in public the thought is there's my church they're a part of my body second question who is the church what is the church it's a body who is the church and by this question i mean to ask who makes up this body biblically speaking we may answer this question in two ways there is the church universal and there is the church local church universal church local the universal church consists of everyone everywhere who has been born again second corinthians 12 13 for in one spirit we were all baptized into one body jews or greeks slaves or free all were made to drink of one spirit so this verse reveals that christianity doesn't belong to any one group of people any one race any one nation it says that anyone who has been saved by christ is a part of his body christ has commissioned us we know as his church to go to the ends of the earth to make disciples therefore we send missionaries and we send them to as many different people as we can everywhere in hope in anticipation that they will be saved and become a part of christ's body with us this is a main reason why we've developed a relationship with aginskons baptist church in latvia to to maintain our focus on the truth that we are part of and called to serve the universal church and i think that helps us to accomplish that now this is why as southern baptists we support the international mission board why we frequently on sunday mornings will play videos that we hope encourage our continued support as a local church to the universal work that is being done to make disciples this is also why we encourage and seek to be involved with voice of the martyrs to support them as a local church in the universal impact that they have on our body if we aren't mindful of this we can forget why our involvement with these organizations is critical the churches all those who have received salvation through faith in jesus christ around the world they are part of us and we are part of them now i've enjoyed in the times that i've had to interact with international christians this one thing that just continually blows my mind and i've witnessed it and heard it from others as well even though we are different even though we've grown up differently even though there's this great separation geographically we can meet with international brothers and sisters in christ and because we share one salvation through our one savior it breaks down all of those barriers that distance creates you ever noticed that before it's amazing the bible says that the church exists on a universal and also on a local level the local church is described in one place in galatians 1 1 through 2 as paul is writing to those churches he says paul i paul an apostle not from men nor!

[37 : 34] through man but through jesus christ and god the father who raised him from the dead and all the brothers who are with me to the churches churches of galatia so here we see as was the case in other regions of the world that in the province of galatia there were many churches they had a localized ministry and so members of the universal church should seek fellowship and edification in the local church this is essential for the growth and development of believers listen a lone wolf mentality does not fit the description of the church being a body the church needs its members present and functioning in order for the body to accomplish its purpose most effectively

Hebrews 10 24 through 25 and let us consider how to stir one another up to love and good works not neglecting to meet together as is the habit of some but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day drawing near the local church is where believers can fully apply the body

principles found in first Corinthians chapter 12 where we are called to encourage one another to teach one another to build one another up in the knowledge of the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ your involvement in the church is critical critically important and it matters to God in answering who is the church from scripture we've seen that the church is universal it's also local that collectively we are a body but also we are a bride a bride if in Ephesians 5 Paul gives instruction there for husbands and in so doing reminds the church that they are the bride of Christ Ephesians 5 25 through 27 husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her that he might sanctify her having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word so that he might present the church to himself in splendor without spot or wrinkle or any such thing that she might be holy and without blemish Christ the bridegroom has sacrificially and lovingly chosen the church to be his bride in Jewish culture a marriage began with a betrothal and engagement during which the bride and groom were separated until the wedding similarly for us the church the bride of Christ we have been separate separated in a way from our Lord though he's very much with us we are not yet physically with him but we one day will be he's promised us that so in the meanwhile what are we to do we are to be faithful to him faithful to his promise that he will return faithful in what he has commanded us to do faithfully faithfully anticipating his imminent return so in answering this question who is the church the church consists of people from all tribes tongues and nationalities who love encourage support and equip one another on a worldwide and local scale the church is the faithful bride of Christ prepared in anticipating his imminent return the church consists of people from all tribes tongues and nationalities who love encourage support and equip one another on a worldwide scale on a worldwide and local scale excuse me the church is the faithful bride of Christ prepared in anticipating his imminent return a church that plateaus declines and dies is often a church that has forgotten who it is and in forgetting who it is they lose sight of what it is that they're supposed to do holding on to a place and a set of traditions and defining the church as consisting of those things instead of consisting of a people purchased by the precious blood of our eternal Savior will cause us to treat one another as strangers instead of family as an assortment of pieces instead of a whole know that some of you probably unwrapped a puzzle this Christmas maybe you were looking forward to getting that puzzle I remember when I was a kid I was not excited to open up a puzzle but you know a puzzle especially the big puzzles like a thousand piece jigsaw puzzle and you open the box and you empty it all out and what do you see a mess right an assortment of pieces all different shapes and sizes and different colors and you try to figure out how do these things fit together to make that picture on that box and you know if you make puzzles what's really discouraging is when you when you're close to completing the puzzle and you realize that you're missing some pieces and no matter what you do no matter how beautiful the picture is your eye is always drawn to the missing pieces of the puzzle isn't it and so you throw it away listen my hope for us as a church is that we will resemble the picture of the church that God has given us to be in his word that there wouldn't be any missing pieces that we would resemble the church that we're called to be that we would resemble Christ in such a way that just like in those puzzles and all those little pieces fit together and they make a beautiful picture and I pray that that would be the case for us too we see that we are a body knit together we're more than a building we're a people and we have a purpose and our purpose is greater than any other purpose in the world and so my hope and again my prayer would be that we would visualize a visualize Christ to one another and to the world in such a way that we will fulfill our wonderful and critically important God given purpose we have four questions of application here they're kind of long questions we'll talk about these tonight I'll give you the fill-ins here and encourage you just to think about these as well and please be praying for our church as we go through this study as well as you think critically through these questions first of all why is the church often tempted to consult sources other than the Bible to determine its purpose why should the church seek answers from the [45 : 35] Bible to define its purpose why is that so important answers from the Bible second question why is it necessary that we shift our focus from seeing the church as a building where people assemble to an assembling of people in the body of Christ to an assembling of people in the body of Christ third what involvement should Christians have with the church on a universal and local level how does this involvement better able us enable us to advance the gospel together how does this understanding better enable us to advance the gospel together and then finally what are the consequences when a church forgets its purpose and may we never have to suffer those consequences as a result of our church forgetting its purpose amen let's pray

Lord God we thank you for the church we thank you that you have called us to be a part of it we thank you for the amazing opportunity and responsibility that you've placed within our hands as your stewards to continue to carry out your mission to continue to do what you've called us to do forgive us God that so often we get to thinking about what our ideal church should be or what it looks like we've been trapped into thinking that the church is a place where I'm primarily supposed to be served instead of to serve and Lord we could go on and on in all the ways that we as your people lose sight of what our purpose as your church is so God we pray that as we go through these sermons as we read through your word that you would open our eyes to see what it is we're supposed to be doing what it is we're supposed to prioritize and that in doing so Lord we would we would reflect you beautifully and brightly to a world in desperate need of your church to be busy doing what you've called your church to do we pray that all of it would glorify you and would please you and we ask this in Jesus name amen you you you you you you you you you you you