

THE CHURCH

by Dr. David Kornfield

I. Self Assessment Worksheet Regarding Belief And Practice About The Church

Three keys in understanding the church follow below. As you respond to each one, circle the following number that you feel best reflects your grasp of that point.

1. I hardly know how to do this.
2. I understand this a little.
3. I somewhat understand this.
4. I understand this well.
5. I understand this very well.
6. I understand this very well and could teach it to others.

A. I know what the church is. I can define it in 25 words or less. (Try it, see how you do!)

Scale: 1 2 3 4 5 6

B. I know why the local church is important. I can identify at least three reasons which convince me of why God has instituted the local church, rather than having His people just meet in small groups for Bible study or prayer whenever they can. (List below as many reasons as you can.)

1.

2.

3.

Scale: 1 2 3 4 5 6

C. I know what the main functions of the church are.
I can list the three principal priorities of a church (listed below).

1.

2.

3.

Scale: 1 2 3 4 5 6

After going over the above items, take some time to look up Scriptures that you think could help you develop your understanding further. Possible Scriptures include: Matt. 18:20; Acts 2:38-46; I Cor. 12-14; Eph. 4:1-17; John 17; I Peter 2:9, 10.

Finally, before meeting for discussion, read the following article on the church. Note that anything that especially blesses or challenges you, as well as jotting down any questions you may have. Feel free to discuss these points with others before the discussion meeting.

Scale: 1 2 3 4 5 6

II. Theological Reflections

With the emphasis on body life and spiritual gifts these days the bookstores are flooded with books on the church. And, compared to other nations, the United States is flooded with churches. So it would seem that the church ought to be rather self-explanatory. However, different books say different things and churches represent different concepts of what the church should be. Christians are under the obligation to develop at least a basic theology of the church, especially since most of us are part of one.

Developing theology is something that every Christian should know how to do. Every Christian ought to be able to take any subject from sex to sacraments, death to drinking, and develop from the Bible what it is that he believes about that subject. This is what I want to do here about the church. For every Christian is a part of the church and cannot afford to drift unthinkingly with any current into which he might happen to fall.

If you would like to work through some basic passages relating to the church and develop some of your own theology before reading on, you might include Acts 2:37-47; 4:32-37; Romans 12, Ephesians 4, and I Corinthians 12-14. These passages focus on the way the church functions and the purpose of the church. It would be very helpful at this point if you would write down a definition of the church. In this way you will not just be receiving information like a cup being filled, but rather will have some basis from which to compare and contrast the definition and theology to be developed below. Once you have done that, continue on.

We will begin with a definition of the church and then look at that definition more carefully and explore some of the theology behind it: "The church is Christ's holy, indwelt people redeemed to be worshipers in submitted community penetrating the world."

The Church is Christ's

First and foremost, the church is Christ's. Does that seem overly obvious? How obvious is it in the church(es) with which you are familiar? If you are not sure, you might ask some of the following questions:

- * Who is the most prominent in the church? Christ? (Acts 4:13, I Cor. 14:23-25)
- * Why do people come to church? To meet with Christ? (Mt. 18:20)
- * How are church decisions made? With Christ? (Heb. 13:17)
- * What is done at church? Is Christ exalted in it? (Eph. 5:19,20; Col. 3:16, 17)
- * Where does the church meet? Is there more emphasis on coming to a certain place or on coming to (and with) a certain Person? (John 4:20-24)

Jesus told Peter that he had found a rock upon which He would build His church and the gates of Hell would not overpower it. What was that rock, that foundation? It was Peter's confession, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Mt. 16:15-20). It seems this should be each Christian's daily confession, and as it is made corporately we have the promise of Christ that the Church will grow irresistably. Jesus Christ is the cornerstone of the church (Eph. 2:20; 1 Peter 2:4-10), but our lives, particularly our corporate lives as the church, are not always clearly built on this cornerstone, the confession that Christ is the Son of the living God and the recognition that He is the Head of the Church. . . not us!

Every glimpse of heaven given in the Scriptures shows Christ in the spotlight being exalted. To the degree that churches are colonies in the Kingdom of God, Christ should be first and foremost in our gatherings. In fact it is only because of Christ that the Church even exists. This is obvious in the definition of the Church given above. Because we are Christ's and only because we are Christ's can we ever think of ourselves as holy. Were it not for Christ's miraculous work, to consider ourselves as indwelt by God would be literally insane. We can only be truly human, fully the people God intended us to be, because of Christ's work past and present. That we are redeemed can be credited to no other than our Saviour. To be worshippers in spirit and in truth can only be experienced by those who are Christ's. The world's understanding of living in community is of necessity shallow without Him who provides an eternal and infallible foundation. Truly Christ as our Head has achieved the impossible, calling us to penetrate this world as His holy, indwelt people redeemed to be worshippers in community. How can the church be anything other than an expression of the fact that "Christ is before all things and in Him all things hold together; He is also head of the body, the church; . . . so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything." (Col. 1:17, 18).

The Church is Holy

The Church is Christ's holy ones. Christ's holy ones are those who are His saints. The word "saints" is literally "holy ones" and in certain languages like Spanish the term for holy, "santo," is the same word as "saint." The term was common in the Old Testament for speaking of the people of God, particularly in the Psalms and Daniel. Paul uses the term constantly in addressing or referring to the people of God, specifically the churches to whom he was writing.

"Saint" or "holy one" means one who is "set apart to." Specifically in the Christian context, this means to be set apart from a self-centered life to the Kingship of Jesus the Christ. The church should be different; it should offer an alternative lifestyle and an alternative set of values from that of the world. The Church's purpose is to become the perfect,

blameless, radiant bride of Christ. Christians are specially called ones whose lives both individually and corporately will shine in healthy, love-and-life-filled contrast to non-Christians as they fall more and more in love with Christ. We are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession” (1 Peter 2:9).

The Church is Indwelt

The Church is Christ’s holy, indwelt ones. God with us, Immanuel, was prophesied in the Old Testament (Is. 7:14), became a part of history in the person of Jesus Christ (Mt. 1:23), and continues in the present in the Body of Jesus Christ. The recent emphasis on Body Life is a necessary emphasis on what we can and should be doing — because of who we are. We are the Body of Christ because we are indwelt by Him. Christ has not just visited planet earth. He has come and gone and returned to us again in the Person of the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-19; 16:7, 13-16).

In the Old Testament, Jehovah repeatedly promised His people something very unusual: He whom the heavens cannot contain would dwell among them (Ex. 29:45, 46; Lev. 26:12; Ezek. 37:27, 38). When Solomon dedicated the temple to the Lord, “the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord” and the temple became a meeting place between the people and Jehovah God (1 Kings 8:11, 27-30). So in Jesus’ time people came from far and wide to the temple in Jerusalem to worship Yahweh. They could not actually come into His presence in the Holy of Holies, but they could gather around the place where He was. However, the Church as God’s people has a different promise from Yahweh, an even more amazing commitment made by the Creator to His creatures. He says, “I will dwell *in* them,” no longer *among* His people, but *in* them (2 Cor. 6:16; John 14:23).

Now instead of the temple or sanctuary in Jerusalem, the living Church has become the dwelling place of God: “Don’t you know that *you* are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (1 Cor. 3:16; 2 Cor. 6:16). We tend to apply such verses to ourselves as individuals, but Paul is writing to Christians as a body, the Body of Christ. It seems that while we are indwelt by the Holy Spirit individually, there is a special sense of God’s presence when we are gathered together (Mt. 18:18, 20; Eph. 2:19-22). In fact, Eph. 4:12-16 suggests that there is no such thing as growing into the fullness of Jesus Christ as “lone ranger” Christians. The whole thrust of growing into maturity in Jesus Christ is corporate.

Jesus is saying “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will go in and eat with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20 NIV). This verse is written not to non-Christians but to Christians, and not just to individual Christians, but to a church. Is it possible that this applies to the churches of America?

You say, “I am rich; I have acquired wealth, and do not need a

thing.” But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. . . Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. . .” (Rev. 3:17, 20 NIV).

“But,” you ask yourself, “what does all this have to do with being indwelt?” The relationship between this Revelation passage and being indwelt is that Christ is *outside* the church, knocking on the door, when He ought to be *inside* the church, “as supreme head to the Church. For the Church is His body, and in that body lives fully the One who fills the whole wide universe” (Eph. 1:22, 23; Phillips). Just as the individual indwelt Christian can grieve or quench the Holy Spirit, so too the gathered people of God can hurt Him — can shut Him out. The Holy Spirit longs to be at home in His Church.

The Church Is People

The Church is Christ’s holy, indwelt *people*. In all the glory and power of being Christ’s, being holy, being indwelt, we must remember that the Church is made up of human beings. To be human means to struggle with faults, with weaknesses, with sins, and with the fear of being vulnerable. God’s people are a people who confess their faults and needs, not just to God but to each other and thereby bear each other’s burdens, intercede for one another, and are the means of healing for each other through Christ (Gal. 6:1, 2; 1 Cor. 12: 20-27; James 5:16).

There is another facet to the Church being human: We humans are the ones the angels and demons are watching to verify whether God’s Kingdom really is all it claims it to be. Paul clarifies this in speaking of the great secret hidden through the ages of God’s plan of salvation. And God’s reason for this plan?

To show to all the rulers in heaven how perfectly wise he is when all of his family — Jews and Gentiles alike — are seen to be joined together in his church, in just the way he had always planned it through Jesus Christ our Lord (Eph. 3:10, 11; Living Bible).

When Christ comes in His glory, every creature above, on, and below the earth will have to confess His Lordship and how great His wisdom truly is (Phil. 2: 9-11). The Church, however, has the great privilege of showing everyone, including all the angelic powers, *in advance*, that God does “have it together” in this confused and spoiled world. We humans, weak and limited as we are, are transformed into a testimony of Christ’s love at work. Those listed in the Bible’s hall of fame are cheering the church on toward the goal of sharing in Christ’s holiness (Heb. 11: 12:1, 10).

The Church Is Redeemed

The Church is Christ’s holy, indwelt people *redeemed*. In creative tension with grandeur of proving God’s wisdom to all the rulers of heaven is the humbling knowledge that we as the Church were once —

under God's curse, doomed forever for our sins. We went along with the crowd and were just like all the others, full of sin, obeying Satan, the mighty prince of the power of the air, who is at work right now in the hearts of those who are against the Lord. All of us used to be just as they are, our lives expressing the evil within us, doing every wicked thing that our passions or our evil thoughts might lead us into. We started out bad, being born with evil natures, and were under God's anger just like everyone else (Eph. 2:1-4; Living Bible).

The next two words stir my blood. They are the words which mark every change in us — as individuals, as a local church, and as the Church Universal throughout history. **BUT GOD. . .!**

We were doomed forever, **BUT GOD** stepped in.

We were full of sin, **BUT GOD** stepped in.

We were obeying Satan, **BUT GOD** stepped in.

We were doing every wicked thing we could think of, **BUT GOD** stepped in.

To redeem, Webster says, is to repurchase or to ransom. God's people were once owned by Satan, **BUT GOD** has ransomed us with a terrible price. We are no longer our own, but Christ's who ransomed us (1 Cor. 6:19, 20). Accepting Christ's payment must be accompanied by a comprehension of the depth from which He has saved us, the depth to which He went to save us, and the heights to which He has raised us (Eph. 2:1-6). We, the redeemed, are the dead called to life; there should be nobody so much **ALIVE** as the gathered people of God. Humble because the work is God's, yet confident for that very reason, it is our privilege to show the dead around us that life and the way to do it.

The Church Is Worshipers

The Church is Christ's holy, indwelt people redeemed *to be worshippers*. We are to glorify God and enjoy Him forever, in the words of the Westminster Catechism. Jesus' life and His prayer in John 17 are good examples of three priorities for the church which appear in many parts of Scripture: 1) His relationship with His Father — worship, 2) His relationship with others committed to God — fellowship, and 3) His relationship with those not yet committed to God — witness.

We worship Him who is our Head, in whom and through whom all things consist and have their being (Col. 1:17, 19). J.I. Packer has put it well in his book *Knowing God*:

What were we made for? To know God. What aim should we set ourselves in life? To know God. What is the 'eternal life' that Jesus gives? Knowledge of God. "This is life eternal, that they might know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent' (John 17:3). What is the best thing in life, bringing more joy, delight, and contentment than anything else? Knowledge of God.

‘Thus said the Lord, let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches; but let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me’ (Jer. 9:23f). What, of all the states God ever sees man in, gives Him most pleasure? Knowledge of Himself. ‘I desire. . . the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings, says God’ (Hos. 6:6) (1973:29).

Watchman Nee insists in his book *Sit, Walk, Stand* that the Christian life has an order of priority and until we have sat in the presence of God, we cannot walk in the Christian life or stand in spiritual warfare (Eph. 2:6; 4:1; 6:10-12). A.W. Tozer says that:

We’re here to be worshippers first and workers only second. We take a convert and immediately make a worker out of him. God never meant it to be so. God meant that a convert should learn to be a worshipper, and after that he can learn to be a worker. Jesus said, “Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel.” Peter wanted to go at once, but Christ said, “Don’t go yet. Wait until you are endued with power.” Power for service? Yes, but that’s only half of it; maybe that’s only one-tenth of it. The other nine-tenths are that the Holy Ghost may restore to us again the spirit of worship. Out of enraptured, admiring, adoring, worshipping souls, then, God does His work. The work done by a worshipper will have eternity in it.” (*Worship: The Missing Jewel of the Evangelical Church*, 1961: 14).

It is worth noting that “to be worshippers” speaks not of something we do so much as something we are. The Church of Jesus Christ is not people who occasionally worship, say, at 11:00 on Sunday mornings, but rather people who are worshippers. Everything they say and do therefore, is an act of worship; it is done for God, with God, and in exaltation of Him. Brother Lawrence in *Practicing the Presence of God* puts it quite well in saying “that we should establish ourselves in a sense of God’s presence by continually conversing with Him” (1959:12). In worshipping we begin to know God, and the more we learn of Him the more are compelled to be worshippers.

The Church Is Submitted

The decision to form the Church did not arise during a discussion among friends, nor was it ratified by a majority vote. Instead, it was the supreme Lord who announced: “I will build my Church” (Mat. 16:18). Why should the apostles, instead of being free to return to their own personal affairs, need to dedicate themselves to the task of making disciples from all nations? It’s because they were under the command of the only Person who could state: “All authority has been given to me in heaven and in earth” (Mat. 28:18). Going baptizing, teaching so as to plant living churches among all the people groups, they would always have with them not the memory of Christ, but rather the powerful

presence of the Lord Himself: "Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Mat. 28:20).

But the Mediator of this personal presence would be the Spirit. During the 40 days preceding the ascension, the Lord Jesus "had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen" (Acts 1:2). After Pentecost, this Lord with the right to command, having promised never to abandon His Church, continued to direct this Body personally, through the Vicar whom He had sent — not a well-meaning super-cleric, elected by a college of clerics, but the Holy Spirit. And Christ, through the Spirit, from the beginning was heard and obeyed by the Church (see Acts 5:3; 8:29; 9:17; 10:19, 20; 13:1-3; 16:6-10).

Such an attitude of submission to the Spirit sent by Christ is a way of bending the knee before the lordship of Christ (Rom. 14:9) and thus glorifying God (Phil. 2:10, 11).

Because we are the human *people* of Christ, He gives us, not only the Spirit, but also human leaders (Eph. 4:10-12; Acts 20:28). By respecting, appreciating and loving the leaders raised up by the Spirit of the supreme Lord (1 Thess. 5:12-13), the Church demonstrates that she is *holy* — separated from the spirit of independence and anarchy that inspires the lost world. It is because she is *indwelt* by the Spirit that she can submit herself in a healthy, productive way to the leaders established by the Head of the Church (Eph. 5:18, 21; Heb. 13: 16-17). Submitted, the Church reflects the glory of Him who in all things should have the preeminence (Col. 1:18).

The Church Is Community

The Church is Christ's holy, indwelt people redeemed to be worshippers *in community*. That theme, the second priority noted above, has flowed throughout this paper, even as it flows through the New Testament. The three sections of Scripture that speak of our diversity through the variety of spiritual gifts that we have been given all emphasize strongly our unity in that diversity (Romans 12:4, 5; 1 Cor. 12:4-7, 11-13, 20-27; Eph. 4:1-6). Christ's high priestly prayer that we may all be one, *just as His Father and He are one*, is repeated four times, more often than any other petition Christ makes (John 17:11, 21-23).

Community (having all things in "common-unity") was one of the distinctives of the New Testament Church (Acts 2:44, 45; 4:32-37). John writes that because we have communion with God, we have communion with each other (1 John 1:3, 6, 7); in fact, the one who does not love his brother is not of God (1 John 2:9; 3:10). That is to say, it is impossible for us to be true worshippers of God, to be one with Him, and not have communion with each other.

It is possible to feel that there is communion with others during brief encounters as on Sunday mornings. It is not possible, however, to have community with only brief encounters on Sunday mornings. Webster defines communion as "an act or instance of sharing," whereas com-

munity is a “unified body of individuals” characterized by: a) joint ownership or participation; b) common character; c) social activity; and, d) a social state or condition.” The emphases on Body Life, small groups and spiritual gifts all flow out of the need for community. Community seems to require commitment to a small group of believers in order for people to share their lives in depth. In Jerusalem, where thousands were added to church at one time, there was considerable small group activity in the homes, centered on eating together and partaking of the Lord’s Supper (Acts 2:46). As the Church spread, community apparently was fostered through house-churches such as those in Rome (Rom. 16:5), Corinth (Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 16:19), the home of Nympha in either Colossae or Laodicea (Col. 4:16), and one in the home of Philemon in Colossae (Phil. 1:2).

The importance of community in the sense of responsible care for all aspects of believers’ lives is reflected in the many “one another” injunctions in the Bible. Caring for one another in the church will touch each individual’s time, money, energy and possessions. Howard Snyder’s *The Problem With Wineskins* and his *The Community of the King* challenge the church in this area.

The Church Penetrates The World

The Church is Christ’s holy, indwelt people redeemed to be worshipers in community *penetrates the world*. Jesus’ prayer for unity among the believers was explicitly “that the world may know (and believe) that Thou didst send Me” (John 17:21, 23). The Church is to be highly visible and highly involved in the lives of those outside the Kingdom. Jesus challenges His followers to be salt and light: to be the world’s flavoring to make it palatable, and to direct the praise of men to God (Mat. 5:13-16).

The believers of Jerusalem were known for “. . . praising God, and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47; NIV). Their unity in worship and community was highly visible to the unsaved and resulted in many being added to the church. It is this example of unity that Christ said would convince the world of who He is (John 17) and, indeed (as mentioned earlier), convince all the rulers in heaven (Eph. 3:9, 10). While there are certain times, such as in the intimacy of the Lord’s Supper, when the church needs some family-like privacy, we also need to actively seek ways in which to demonstrate our love, both individually and corporately, among those who do not yet know Christ.

Effective “in the world” community requires that Christians committed to each other live close enough to each other to interact regularly between households, both with those which are part of the committed community and with those which are not yet part of it. Only in this way will unbelievers be able to see believer’s love and unity on a daily basis, as happened in Jerusalem. And when the believers not only meet each

other's needs, but also reach out to meet unbelievers' needs in a natural way because they are neighbors. Christ is made visible through His Body. A church in this setting will be a dynamic, healthy body — if the priorities are straight: worshippers first, in community second, and in the world third. The three are inseparable in daily living, but the priorities will shape the distinctives for which the church will be known, the format and type of meetings, and whether the work will be God's or man's.

The definition which has been developed of the church has entirely inseparable parts: "The Church is Christ's holy, indwelt people redeemed to be worshippers in community penetrating the world." It quickly becomes obvious that we cannot really be or do any part of the definition unless every one of the other parts is also true. For instance, we cannot be worshippers unless we are Christ's, unless we are holy, unless we are indwelt, unless we are fully human, unless we are redeemed, unless we are worshipping with others, and unless we are reaching out to the world as a result of who our God is.

In New Testament times, to be committed to Christ implied being committed to His people in a local church. Some will surely ask, "Why can't we be part of the Church Universal without being committed to a local church?" It seems that just as Jesus Christ is the incarnation of the Godhead, the local church is the incarnation of the Church Universal. The Godhead and the Church Universal are both invisible spiritual entities which are a great mystery and in some sense incomprehensible to us. Because Jesus lived as a man among us, we can understand that God really is all He says He is, and know that His promises to us are really true. The witnesses of Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension persuade us that we too will be raised with Him to eternal life.

Because Jesus suffered and died for us, we know that God's love is real. Similarly, the local church is the incarnate revelation of the Church Universal, proving its nature and reality in the everyday lives of those Christ came to save. If Jesus Christ is not who He says He is, then we must give up our belief concerning the Godhead (1 Cor. 15:12-32). Similarly, if the local church is not becoming what it should be, then any biblical claims concerning the church in general are open to doubt. Here we must recognize that Jesus Christ was infallible and so accurately represents the Godhead, whereas we are very fallible and do not yet wholly represent what the Church will be. God has given the church time on this earth, however, to grow into the maturity He desires of His Son's glorious Bride. The Scriptural guidelines for development of Christian maturity are written to and about specific bodies of believers, not just to individual Christians nor to an abstract, invisible Church. It is in our life together that we prove God's grace.

The basic passages on the church mentioned at the beginning include the following: Acts 2:37-47; 4:32-37; Rom. 12; Eph. 4; and 1 Cor. 12-14. Below is the definition of the church which has been developed in this paper, with the texts that speak to each part of the definition. Perhaps

this will be of some help for those who wish to study it further.
The Church Is:

CHRIST'S	Acts 2:38, 47; 4:33, Rom. 12:1,5,11; 1 Cor. 12:3-6; 18; Eph. 4:1, 7-11, 15-16, 30
HOLY	Acts 2:38; Rom. 12:1,9,21; 1 Cor. 12:3, Eph. 4:12,3]
INDWELT	Acts 2:38; 4:33; 1 Cor. 12:3-11.13; Eph. 4:3-6,30.
PEOPLE	Acts 2:39; Rom 12:3; Eph. 4:8.
REDEEMED	Acts 2:38; Eph. 4:22-24. 30
TO BE	
WORSHIPPERS	Acts 2:42, 43, 47, 11; Rom. 12:1, 11; Eph. 4:13, 15.
SUBMITTED	Acts 4:35-37; Rom. 12:1, 2; 1 Cor. 12:28; 14:29; 16:15, 16; Eph. 4:11, 12; 1 Tim. 3:4,5; 5:17, 22; Heb. 13: 7, 17; 1 Pet. 5:1-8
IN	
COMMUNITY	Acts 2:42-44-46; 4:32-37; Rom. 12:4-10, 13, 15, 16; 1 Cor. 12-14; Eph. 4:11-16.
PENETRATING	
THE WORLD	Acts 2:47; Rom 12:2, 14, 17, 18; 1 Cor. 14:22-25; Eph. 4:17f.

The above definition of the church calls Christians to radical discipleship — together. Being the church as defined here requires taking specific steps to see what changes we need to make together, and the first of those steps may be coming to Christ in confession that we have failed to be who He has called us to be. Only through thoughtful meditation and prayer can a definition be taken from paper and worked into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Christ's Church will not grow by might, nor by strength, but by God's Spirit and His leading in ways we never imagined. It may take many different forms, but everywhere it will have a deep impact on those who are a part of it and those who are around it. For the church is not just a religious club, it is:
CHRIST'S HOLY, INDWELT PEOPLE REDEEMED TO BE WORSHIPPERS IN SUBMITTED COMMUNITY PENETRATING THE WORLD

. . . that God might be exalted
. . . the people of God perfected
. . . and the dead called to life!

III. Small Group Discussion Questions

What Is The Church?

We have been studying three questions this last week:

1. What is the church?

2. Why is the church important?

3. What are the top priorities of the church?

After reflecting on the following hymn regarding the church, we'll look a little further at each of these three questions.

There is today a great gathering of people, a cloud of witnesses,
A mighty army advancing through the ages of time and across the pages
of history. They might have been brought together from every tongue
and race and nation, And bound together by the strong cords of divine
love. They are the redeemed, the cleansed, empowered pilgrims of God.
Jesus calls them "My Church" and my friends, beloved of God, brothers
and sisters, joint heirs with Jesus, children of the Kingdom, the family
of God, the salt of the earth, the light of the world, sons of God, daughters
of the Kingdom, chosen people, witnesses, believers, more than con-
querers. . .

**I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH, I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH, I
WILL BUILD MY CHURCH! AND THE GATES OF HELL
AGAINST IT SHALL NEVER NEVER PREVAIL!**

The power of death shall not subdue it!
The forces of evil shall not overpower them!
The doors of hell shall not shove in on it!
The power of Satan's world shall never overthrow it!
The gates of hell shall not hold out against it!
The might of Hades shall not triumph over it!

(" I Will Build My Church" by the Regeneration)

1. Think back over your recent study of the church and write down one of the ideas that most blessed or impressed you.

2. Break into groups of four to share those key insights about the church that have blessed you recently.

3. The paper you read defined the church as "Christ's holy, indwelt people redeemed to be worshipers in submitted community penetrating the world." Note any comments or questions you have about this definition.

4. Let's share together these comments or questions to enrich our understanding of what the church is.

Why Is The Local Church Important?

1. In your preparation for this session, you listed reasons why the local church is important. Go on to list here why you believe God has instituted the local church, rather than having His people just meet in small groups for Bible study or prayer whenever they can. When you can, include Scripture references that support your perspective. Feel free to use your Bible.

2. Together let's share the reasons we've written down. Below add any reasons that you had not already listed above.

Reasons Why God Has Ordained The Local Church Rather Than Leaving Christians To Simply Fellowship As Best They Can

1. The local church is the incarnate revelation of the church universal, much as Jesus Christ is the incarnate revelation of the Godhead. Both Christians and nonChristians know the reality of the mystery of the Church by the way it is lived out at the local level. If it is lived out poorly, they will inevitably question whether what Scriptures say about Christ and His church is anything more than idealism, impractical for the nitty-gritty world in which we all live.

2. The local church is the incarnate revelation of Christ himself. Scriptures do not say that the church is *like* Christ's body, but that it *is* Christ's body. This mystery is great (Eph. 1:22, 23; 4:12-16; 5:29,30; Col. 1:18,24; 2:19; I Cor. 12:27; Cf Acts 9:5). God has chosen to reveal his character and his person through the church. While he reveals himself through us as individuals, the fullness of his attributes is shown in a special way through our corporate life together. For instance:

- * His holiness: Eph. 1:4; 5:27
- * His grace: Eph. 1:5, 6; 4:7; 5:29
- * His sovereignty: Eph. 1:18-23; (and our submission: Eph. 5:21ff)
- * His wisdom: Eph. 3:10
- * His power: Eph. 3:20, 21
- * His unity (Three yet One): Eph. 4:4-6; 11-16; John 17:21-23
- * His love: Eph. 3:16-19; 4:15,16; 5:1,2; John 13:34, 35
- * His truthfulness: Eph. 4:15, 24, 25
- * His mercy and forgiveness: Eph. 4:31
- * His faithfulness: II Tim. 2:11-13; Heb. 10:23-26 (He is a covenanting God and we are the people of His New Covenant.)

God's attributes tend to be most fully evident in our corporate life because they are manifest in the context of personal relationships.

3. God desires of us not just individual maturity, but corporate maturity. We can not become all God intends us to be alone (Eph. 4:11-16;

I Cor. 12:14-27). God's purpose from the beginning of history has been to fashion for Himself a Bride. Billheimer in a book called *Destined for the Throne* (1975) explains more fully that history is only the handmaiden of the church, and the nations of the world are but tools of God to bring His Church to maturity (Acts 17:26, 27). We are ever tempted toward individualism, selfishness, "doing our own thing," and having the last word. Part of Christ's solution for warding off his temptation in our daily lives is our being involved in the submitted community known as his church.

4. God has established the institutions of the family and the church to be our foundation for living, bringing order and wholeness. All spiritual authority has been established by God to bring those in the church's care into maturity (Eph. 5:20-6:4; 4:11-16). Godly authority provides order, protection, guidance and community whether it be in the church or in the family. Instead of our lives being fragmented into many parts, God intends for the family and church to provide a foundation or a center to which all the other parts of our life relate.

5. Being a member of Christ's church is a part of our identity — true at all times and in all places — and not to be confused with one of our many roles. A role is situation specific, while our identity is what we are regardless of the circumstances of situations in which we find ourselves. Our identity as sons and daughters of God and members of Christ's Church in the world should underlie and permeate any role we play. We must repent of a "going to church" mentality that comes from thinking of participation in the church as just one more role. The low view of the church entertained almost universally among Christians is the cause of a hundred lesser evils everywhere among us. A whole new philosophy of the Christian life has resulted from this one basic error in our religious thinking.

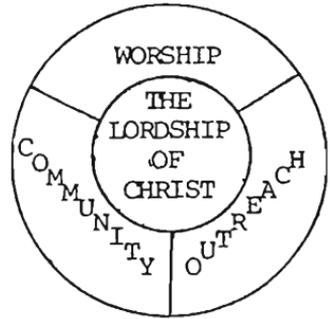
Jim Wallis has put it well: "The greatest influence on a person's life will be that institution or set of institutions on which the person feels most dependent for power and support. As long as most Christians are more dependent upon the powers and principalities of the world for their survival and security than they are upon the Christian community, the church cannot do anything other than conform to the world. . . The community of the local church must become the most important and central corporate reality of our lives, the daily environment out of which our lives are lived, the fellowship of people that sustains and supports us. The church must represent a body of people who have committed their lives to one another in Christ, a communion of faith and trust. . . and a corporate sign of the transforming power of the gospel of the kingdom in this world" ("Seeds of the Kingdom", *Sojourners*, January 1977).

The Top Priorities Of The Church

1. Let's list as a group the top priorities of the local church.

*
*
*
*

2. Our top priorities in the Kingdom are relationships, not programs. The diagram below indicates that the Lordship of Christ is the heart and center of the church. The priorities of the church flow from living under his Lordship. Our first priority (worship) is to be in a life-producing relationship with God. Our second priority (community) is to be in a life-producing relationship with God's people. Our third priority (outreach) is to be in a life-producing relationship with the world.



These three priorities overlap and interrelate since none of them can truly be healthy without the other two.

Let's take a couple minutes to discuss what would happen to our first two priorities if our outreach was nonexistent or ignored. What would be some of the consequences to our relationship with God (worship) and to our relationships with God's people?

*
*
*
*

3. Now let's take a couple minutes to discuss what would happen to our worship and our outreach if our practice of community was nonexistent or ignored.

*
*
*
*

4. Finally, let's discuss what would happen to our community and outreach if our worship was nonexistent or ignored.

*
*
*

5. Redo the self-assessment sheet at the beginning of this article. In comparing the new results with those previously recorded you should find that your understanding of the church has developed.

Celebrating Our Call To Be Christ's Church

1. The church is often not what she should be, including our own local church. Earlier we stressed the importance of the local church; perhaps a better way of putting it is that *a given church's importance is in proportion to how much she reveals the character of God*. If we reveal little of God's character as a church, we are unimportant and should probably dissolve as a church. If we reveal much of God's character, then He is glorified and vindicated in allowing His reputation to be identified with the church (Eph. 3:10).

This calls us, therefore, to humble dedication individually and corporately to be all God has called us to be. This humble dedication is expressed in the following song (to the tune of "Rise up, O Men of God"). Since the song begins with a call to kneel, let's kneel as we begin singing (or reading) the song. The last verse calls for us to rise, so let's stand at that point and remain standing for a time of conversational prayer as the Lord leads.

Kneel down, servants of God, bow humbly 'fore the throne.
Forget not that the work is God's or we will fail alone. (Zech. 4:6)

Rise up, O holy God! Your presence purges sin.
Cleansed we to You our voices raise in this our hymn of praise.
(Ps. 68:1-4)

Rise up, servants of God, the Lord seeks through the land
The gaps are many to be filled; will He find those who'll stand?
(Ezek. 22:30)

Rise up, servants of God, the Head for you doth call.
Hold back not one little thing; give nothing or give all. (Luke 9:57-62)

We rise, Your servants, Lord, responding to Your search.
Our lives together woven are committed to Your church. (Eph. 4:11-16)

(Conversational prayers)

