

“The church is the gathering of God’s people...”

Introduction: Church confusion

Lego exhibition with my kids.

Temple of Artemis in Ephesus, modern day Turkey.

It was one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world.

Acts 19 *NIV*

²³ About that time there arose a great disturbance about the Way [=Christianity]. ²⁴ A silversmith named Demetrius, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in a lot of business for the craftsmen there. ²⁵ He called them together, along with the workers in related trades, and said: “You know, my friends, that we receive a good income from this business. ²⁶ And you see and hear how this fellow Paul has convinced and led astray large numbers of people here in Ephesus and in practically the whole province of Asia. He says that gods made by human hands are no gods at all. ²⁷ There is danger not only that our trade will lose its good name, but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be discredited; and the goddess herself, who is worshiped throughout the province of Asia and the world, will be robbed of her divine majesty.”

²⁸ When they heard this, they were furious and began shouting: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!” ²⁹ Soon the whole city was in an uproar. The people seized Gaius and Aristarchus, Paul’s traveling companions from Macedonia, and all of them rushed into the theater together. ³⁰ Paul wanted to appear before the crowd, but the disciples would not let him. ³¹ Even some of the officials of the province, friends of Paul, sent him a message begging him not to venture into the theater.

³² The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there. ³³ The Jews in the crowd pushed Alexander to the front, and they shouted instructions to him. He motioned for silence in order to make a defense before the people. ³⁴ But when they realized he was a Jew, they all shouted in unison for about two hours: “Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!”

³⁵ The city clerk quieted the crowd and said: “Fellow Ephesians, doesn’t all the world know that the city of Ephesus is the guardian of the temple of the great Artemis and of her image, which fell from heaven? ³⁶ Therefore, since these facts are undeniable, you ought to calm down and not do anything rash. ³⁷ You have brought these men here, though they have neither robbed temples nor blasphemed our goddess. ³⁸ If, then, Demetrius and his fellow craftsmen have a grievance against anybody, the courts are open and there are proconsuls. They can press charges. ³⁹ If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a **legal assembly**. ⁴⁰ As it is, we are in danger of being charged with rioting because of what happened today. In that case we would not be able to account for this commotion, since there is no reason for it.” ⁴¹ After he had said this, he dismissed the **assembly**.

Now, we’re not actually going to be spending much time looking at this passage.

But we read it because the Greek word that stands behind our English word “church” is *ekklesia*, and it wasn’t a religious word at all. It simply meant a gathering or assembly. It appears 3x in the passage I’ve just read to you; v32,39,41. None of these are about a Christian church.

- Although v32 could be! Confusion. Most people not even knowing why they are there! lol.

This Summit is going to cure that. So that we will all know why we are there and what we’re supposed to be doing.

Why do you “go to church” on a Sunday morning? (or Saturday night, or whenever)? People go to church services for lots of different reasons.

- Out of habit. It’s what you’ve always done. Sunday doesn’t feel like Sunday unless you go.
- To have a personal experience of God. It’s as though the church is a special place where God lives. And so to experience him you need to go there.
- As a religious duty. Some believe that God will be impressed with them when they perform this religious activity, and bless them as a result.
- For a worship experience. The music and singing with many other people gives you a particular experience that lifts you up, and makes you feel closer to God.

- For the social network that church provides. You go there because your friends—your offline social network—is there.

Well, there's lots of different ideas about church right there, isn't there? I wonder which of them—if any—are good ways to think about belonging to a church?

To add to the confusion we use the English word “church” in at least 5 different ways.

What is meant by “church” in each of these phrases?

- a) A group of people belonging to a particular congregation (“I’m a member of St Argy-Bargy’s Anglican church”),
- b) the building (“I need to pick up my guitar from church”),
- c) the service that happens on a Sunday morning (“What time does church normally finish?”),
- d) a denomination (“the Anglican church”),
- e) Christianity more broadly (“church leaders have expressed concerns”).

Most of these do not line up with what the Bible is talking about. It creates confusion for us because we are using the same word for all these different things. So let's try to get some clarity.

1. “Church” in the Bible

Over these 4 talks we're going to build up a definition of what “church” is from the Scriptures; taking a phrase each day and unpacking it.

- Just so you know, this is where we're heading: “The Church is the gathering of God's people around Christ, by his Spirit, through his word, to bring him glory”.
- And today we're beginning with “The Church is the gathering of God's people...”.

First, we know it's a gathering of people because that's simply what the word means. *ekklesia*. Secular or otherwise. Gathering of people.

- So there are all sorts of “gatherings”, I guess. (Like Acts 19 showed us.)
- But as Christians we’re interested in a particular type of gathering: the Christian gathering that we now call “church”.

Now, you may be surprised to know this, but the first “church” we meet in our Bibles is in the Old Testament. I say this because in Acts 7:38 the word *ekklesia* is used for the OT gathering of God’s people at Mount Sinai in the book of Exodus.

That’s why we had our reading from Exodus. It’s a kind of pattern of “church” from the OT.

Exodus 19–24

There’s lots going on at Sinai, but here are some of the most important things for us as we think about “church”.

- The preceding context is that God has just saved his people out of slavery in Egypt (19:4), and for the first time they are a people / a nation (19:6). And God gathers his people to himself at Mt Sinai.
- Now, the fact that God gathers his people to himself is amazing in itself. The big problem between God and humanity is that he is a holy God and we are sinful. So gathering around God is not as straightforward as you might think.
- This is why the mountain is fenced off and the people are told they cannot come up to see God or they will die. It’s showing that, although they are God’s people, their sin is still a problem that hasn’t been adequately dealt with yet.
- When they are gathered around the mountain, and God descends, some pretty dramatic things begin to happen.

Close your eyes and try to imagine this. Thunder, lightning, earthquakes, thick cloud and darkness, and yet at the same time somehow the top of the mountain was on fire, and there was smoke everywhere, a sound like a trumpet blast that kept on getting louder and louder.

It was terrifying! No way the people were going to try and break through the barriers to see God. They didn't even want him to keep speaking to them (20:19).

- So there were amazing and terrifying things happening on that mountain. But the way that God actually related to his people is through his word. If we kept reading through Exodus we would see God continuing to speak to the people through Moses, and revealing himself, his name, his character, and his will for his people.
- Finally, in Exodus 24 God makes a *covenant* between himself and the people. Now a covenant is a formal agreement between people.

A marriage is a covenant as well. We make promises to each other to behave in a certain way.

Both parties have obligations under this covenant at Mount Sinai. God promises to be their God and protect them. They promise to listen to his word and obey.

Now, all this may sound very foreign to our experience.

- Not sure if your church gathers around a mountain.
- Not sure when you last had fire and darkness and earthquakes and lightning flashing around.
- Not sure the last time you felt *fear* when gathering with your church.

It sounds very foreign to us. But the Bible says that the Israelites were “churching” at the foot of the mountain! In many ways what we are doing is what they were doing.

- i. God has saved us and gathered us to himself.
- ii. Our gathering is a better one, because our sin has really been dealt with, through Jesus' death and resurrection.
- iii. God continues to relate to us by speaking his word to us.
- iv. He has made a new covenant with us. He promises that he will be our God and so we must live as his people.

2. The Universal Church and the Local Church

OK, so there's a surprising connection between our being a part of God's church today, and the way the Israelites gathered around God back then at Sinai.

But how do *we* gather? It's easy to see how Israel did it at Sinai. What about us?

Well, there's 2 senses in which we gather:

- Universal and local.
- In heaven and on earth.

UNIVERSAL HEAVENLY CHURCH

Ultimately there is only 1 church. Jesus died to save one people, not many different churches/peoples. [John 10:16; Eph 2:13-16]

This one church is gathered to God already — right now — in Christ.

Colossians 3

¹ Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. ² Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things. ³ For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. ⁴ When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.

When we put our trust in Christ we are connected to him. So closely that whatever happens to Jesus happens to us as well.

You see an example of this close connection when Paul has his Damascus Road conversion experience. Paul has been persecuting the church, and Jesus says "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"

We are intimately connected to Jesus, and he to us.

Note then, v1, that we have already 'been raised with Christ' → past tense. We died with Christ (v3), and we've been raised with Christ as well.

Jesus has been raised from the dead. And he has ascended to heaven and now sits at the right hand of God (v1). Since we are connected to him, this

is where we are spiritually as well! We are in heaven, seated at the right hand of God! That is why v3 can say that our ‘life is now hidden with Christ in God’.

- We feel as though we’re here on earth, in delightful Rawson. (And that’s true, we are here physically.)
- But there’s another, deeper truth, and that is that we’re united with Christ and therefore with him in heaven.

There’s lots more that could be said from that passage. But the point I want you to grasp right now is this: Christians are already gathered to God — right now! — spiritually, because we are united with Christ.

All believers / from all times / all cultures are one in Christ, and are gathered in a very real sense around God already.

That means there is one Church, one universal Church. And it’s from that one Church that all our local churches get their existence from; as we’ll see in a moment.

We’re going to think more about our gathering around Christ tomorrow. For the rest of this talk I want to concentrate on the__

LOCAL EARTHLY CHURCH

We also gather as Christians here on earth.

- We gather as often as we can.
- And because we are bodily creatures, we need to gather in lots of smaller, local groups. Right? Because it’s impossible for the worldwide body of Christians to gather as one.

Now I want you to see that the *reason* we gather now, locally, here, from suburb to suburb and city to city, is because we are *already* gathered spiritually in Christ.

- The heavenly leads to the earthly.
- The universal demands the local.

So of course we gather. How could we not?

If we didn't it'd be like a choir that never go together to sing,
or a sporting team that never met to play,
or a family that never got together to share a meal.

We're already gathered, and so we continue to gather.

Each local church is a real example—a real representation—of the universal church.

1 Corinthians 1

¹ Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, ² to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people ...

1 Corinthians 12

²⁷ Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Note: Paul doesn't write to "one part of the body of Christ" in Corinth, but to "the body of Christ".

And this is the pattern we see through the NT.

- Wherever there is a city or a town, there is a gathering, and that is the church.
- We can see that each gathering is the church in a book like Galatians, which is written to a *region* rather than a city. Then we get the plural.

Galatians 1

¹ Paul, an apostle—sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead— ² and all the brothers and sisters with me, to the churches in Galatia: ³ Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ

Plural. Because the *gathering* is what makes a church.

So,

What difference does any of this make?

Cross these off on the earlier slide as we go.

It's a *gathering*, so we're not talking about denominations or Christians generally because they never gather.

It's a *gathering of people*, so we're not talking about buildings or a Sunday service.

Horacek cartoon "apostrophe man"

Using words carefully is not a just a game for people who are uptight about grammar and punctuation.

It has real consequences, as we're going to see in a minute.

But to help us all try to be more thoughtful about how we use and misuse the word "church", I'm instituting a new rule for the rest of Summit:

Ear flick for any use of the word "church" that isn't about people!

Here are 4 important implications that flow out of what we've discovered about church so far.

a) Church ≠ worshipping by yourself

The gospel doesn't just save individuals. God creates a people. This is true in the OT, NT, now, and where history is ultimately heading in the new heavens and new earth. This emphasis on relationships in community shouldn't surprise us given God is Trinity: Father, Son, and Spirit.

Aussies: we do not naturally do gathering and community well. In fact we are radicals/extremists/fundamentalists when it comes to individualism.

Collectivist vs Aussie individualism. Graph.

This is a danger for us because we think so individualistically.

Wireless modem graphic

Social media is probably making it even less clear why we need to gather physically. We are getting more and more used to “connecting” with people without actually gathering with them / seeing them face to face.

And so we may be tempted to feel that we can do everything that happens in a church service on our own:

- read God’s word on my Bible app,
- spend time in prayer,
- podcast the best preachers from around the world,
- and listen to amazing “worship music” on Spotify.

All is not well in Aussie churches.

- Committed Christians used to be called “twicers”, meaning that they would gather with their church twice on a Sunday.
- These days a committed Christian might still be called a “twicer”, but now it means they gather twice a month.

Stats:

52 weeks - 4 annual leave - 2 sick - 9 long weekends in Vic - 2 Xmas/NYE
= 35 weeks.

And you would’ve think you’ve “skipped church at all”.

Comparison w our American friends...

They were shocked when they heard that a committed Christian here might only get there 35 times but consider themselves a “regular”.

The Scriptures anticipated that Christians would struggle to keep prioritising gathering with one another. They warn about this very thing, that I think Australian churches are infected by. ___

Hebrews 10

²³ Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, ²⁵ not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit

of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Brothers. Sisters. We need to turn this individualism and blasé approach to church around.

And I believe we here—in this room—can make a difference by deciding that we are going to be different to what has become normal in our Aussie culture. We are going to gather with God’s people every week, if not two or three times per week.

b) Church ≠ mere gathering

Our churches should not be places of mere gathering. You know: you’re in the same space as each other, but that’s as far as it goes.

A church I used to be a member of, where everyone sat scattered throughout the building.

No. God’s church is supposed to be a place of significant and deep relationships. Think of words like fellowship, community, and family.

The sort of things the NT imagines happening in our churches supposes that we are meeting face to face for more than an hour on Sunday. Things like:

- loving one another,
- sharing in each other’s sufferings and joys,
- encouraging and spurring each other on in the faith,
- knowing your leaders well, and them knowing you too.

How can we do these things unless we are gathering regularly?

So if you know you’re someone who’s only getting to church half the time, stop it. Jesus saved you to be a part of that community. Make it a priority.

And if you're a member of a huge church — 100s and 100s of people — then there needs to be ways that deep relationships can form. If you're effectively attending a rock concert where you never see the same people twice can't be a functioning church.

It also means we don't move churches lightly. Sometimes there are genuine reasons to leave your church. But more often we leave for silly reasons. If we move church every time there's a disagreement with someone then we will seriously stunt our growth and miss out on what God intends church to be for us: a loving Christian family spurring each other on.

c) Church ≠ a building

The church is a gathering of God's people; not a building.

This should be obvious since none of the early churches in the NT had a building like we do. They met in someone's home. In many parts of the world it's still the case today.

I learnt this little song as a child: "Here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors, and there are all the people!"

But no. The church is not the building.

I'll give you one example from my own experience showing how confusion on this point made a really important difference.

I church I used to attend equated "church" with "the building". This was partly because the building was quite impressive as far buildings go. It was grand. It had high ceiling and beautiful stained-glass windows. It was historical, one of the earliest church buildings in Australia actually. It had been built with bricks made by convicts in the colonial days, and is on the list of Heritage buildings.

But this focus on the building harmed the gospel going out in at least two ways.

In winter those high ceilings were impossible to heat, and the building was freezing. I got into the habit of doing two fast laps around the cemetery to warm up before going inside. It really got in the way of new people joining us, it was so cold. So the pastor and some gospel-hearted members planted an evening congregation in the nearby church hall. This was a more modern building. Not beautiful but functional, and most importantly: it was able to be heated. But this new congregation was looked down upon by some, and I

remember someone telling me that the 6pm service “wasn’t really church”. I asked what they meant. And their answer was simple: “it’s not church because they’re not meeting in the church.”

But it got worse than that. Convict bricks are historical, but they’re not good bricks. They break down after only a year or two. And because the building was on the Heritage list we couldn’t repair the broken with good ones, we had to use bricks that we just like the original convict ones! This constant repairing cost a the church a lot of money. And so this focus on the building led to our church fundraising in the general community of non-Christians to maintain our building!

Argh! Rather than going out to tell the community about Jesus, the first thing outsiders might hear from us was a request for money.

If that’s the situation I say let the thing fall down, or let the Heritage Society take it over. And we, the church, will get on with reaching the community for Christ, not restoring ageing buildings and becoming a stench in the eyes of unbelievers.

d) Church ≠ a denomination

Let me ask you a question: if we’re passionate about Christian unity — as we should be — does that mean we should try to unite different denominations or branches of Christianity?

Well, understanding that church is the *gathering* of God’s people helps a lot here. It means “church” only really refers to one of two things: the universal heavenly gathering around Christ and the earthly gathering of the local church.

Denominations are not church. They’re a collection of churches that have a shared history and try to work together. Nothing wrong with that. In fact it can be really helpful in a number of ways.

When we think about Christian unity, then:

First, let’s recognise that we are *already* unified with all true Christians everywhere and everywhen, for we are all gathered in Christ *right now*. We don’t need to create that unity; it’s already there because of what Jesus has done.

Then second, we want to live out this spiritual unity in real, tangible ways. But the place to do that is in our local church. Seeking to unify the denominations is just not where it's at.

While it sounds noble, it actually keeps the challenge of really loving our sisters and brothers "out there" somewhere. It's much more difficult to love the old bloke sitting in the pew in front of me than it is to foster warm thoughts about Christians in other places that we may never meet or have to interact with.

Conclusion

Well, that's a lot! Just for our first talk.

What I hope you've heard loud and clear so far is that "the Church is the gathering of God's people".

We'll build on that tomorrow.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We thank you that you are a gathering God.

Thank you that despite our sin, you've loved us, and you sent your Son to die in our place, so that the barrier between us and you could be removed.

Thank you that we are gathered to you already in Christ.

And please help us to prioritise gathering with your people as often as we can.

In your Son's name we pray,

Amen.