

“The Church: What is it and what’s the point?”

1 Peter 2:4-9

Introduction: {SLIDE 1}

What is the Church and what is the point? As we saw in the video, there are so many different ways to view what church is: it’s a building, it’s a place to make money, church is within man, church is a place where we worship God. And there are so many feelings surrounding church: some felt bad that they haven’t been for a while, for some, it inspired only anger, one man saw it as a social structure with no real meaning and only went with his wife because she wanted to, and some were searching for something beyond this life.

The Greek word used in the New Testament for “Church” is “ekklesia.” Now, to the Greek society, “ekklesia” did not denote anything particularly religious. Instead, it was used to refer to political assemblies. But the authors of the Septuagint, which was the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, used the term “ekklesia” to refer to the Jewish religious practices and gatherings. In the NT, ekklesia referred both to the local church as well as all of Christianity.

However, the New Testament example of church does not reflect our modern sensibilities. They saw it not only as a gathering, but as a community. It was not an individual sport like bowling, but instead it was meant for team players. Each person played an important role within the family and needed to view it as a participatory group, not as something they could simply go in and out of as they chose.

This all raises the question then, what is Church, for us, and what is the point, for us? What is this thing that we go to on Sundays, maybe Wednesdays. What is this group that we place membership with, and send our children to its VBS and give money to? Why does Church matter?

Today we’re going to attempt to answer some of those questions by looking at Peter’s vision of the Church found in 1 Peter 2:1-12. In this passage, he outlines who the church is, what the church does, and how people grow into mature Christians who participate in church life. We’re going to look at these three factors who, what, and how, in a different way this morning. The nature of the church, meaning the people who are a part of it, the way that it functions in the world, and the way in which people develop within the church, is a cycle, in which each component continuously feeds into the rest. I’ve created an illustration to help you understand what I mean. So, to answer the big question, what’s the point, we’re going to be looking at three questions that Peter answers about the church in this passage.

*{ADVANCE TO SLIDE 2}

1) The first question that Peter answers is “Who is the Church?” In 1 Peter 2:5 he writes:

“you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

Peter calls us “living stones,” and says that we are being built into a spiritual house. But what does that mean? What does it mean to be a living stone?

Stones only gain their purpose within the context of the building that they compose. A stone by itself is nothing special; a stone built along with others can be formed into a powerful structure.

The Church, then, the “spiritual house” is made up of us; in order to truly form the church we must be in community. Christians cannot exist solely as individuals.

William Barclay tells this story. “A Spartan king boasted to a visiting monarch about the walls of Sparta. The visiting monarch looked around and could see no walls. He said to the Spartan king, “Where are these walls about which you boast so much?” His host pointed at his bodyguard of magnificent troops. “These,” he said, “are the walls of Sparta, every man a brick.”

Our American sensibilities cry out for individualism. We demand our individual rights and freedoms. Many of us are taught to be ashamed to ask help from anyone else, or admit that we need people. But even at the beginning of creation, God made woman because he knew that humanity was meant to be in relationship. Adam could not exist with just himself and the animals. The NT vision of church strikes at the heart of this individualism. It says forget that, being a Christian is all about relationships. Church is all about community. Our individualism is only important in that it can be used to better the church.

In Ephesians, Paul also writes of a vision of the church as a building or a temple.

Ephesians 2:19-22

“¹⁹ Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.”

Paul makes it clear that the church is not about our individual selves. It is a collaborative of people, founded on Jesus Christ, stretching toward God in worship and adoration and reaching into the earth with arms of love. Being in the church precludes individualism; we are not a pile of stones, we are a structure built for a purpose.

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2) The second question that Peter answers is what does the church do? Again in vs. 5 he writes that we “*are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.*” He continues in vs. 9 “*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.*”

I love Scripture; I love the vision of God found within. And I appreciate the authors who convey truth to us. But the truth is, we live in a different context and culture than Peter did, and so the language of “priesthood” and “holy nation” and “spiritual temple” can often be lost on us; to many, it may sound like a lot of “church talk” that has little relevance to our real lives. But, Peter’s words here hold great significance to the purpose and function of the church. So we’re going to take a few moments to break through the language barrier and uncover what Peter has to say about what the church is to do.

Peter tells us that we are being built into a Spiritual House. What does he mean by “spiritual house”? What is the purpose in analogizing the Church to a building? Well, the “Spiritual House” or “temple” would have housed the priesthood of God, which he says is what we are to be. We are priests. So what, does that mean that we have to wear robes and clerics? Should we get large staves to carry around, or maybe big flashy hats to wear? No. When Peter wrote this letter, he had a different vision of priesthood than we would have. There are two components of the priesthood that I would like to look at right now. First, the priesthood that Peter was aware of, the one found in the OT and NT, functioned as the communicator between mankind and God. They were the only ones who were allowed to enter into the Holy places and bear the presence of God. The temple no longer exists like that; we all have access to God in the way that the priests do. So now, we intercede not between God and the Church, but between God and the world. We are charged with the call to bring God’s message of love and salvation to the world.

Second, the priests were the ones who took the sacrifices of the people before God for the forgiveness of their sins. Because Jesus Christ died for the sins of all, those forms of sacrifices are no longer needed. And so the Royal Priesthood, the Church, now replaces those animal sacrifices with itself and its life as a spiritual sacrifice to God. We are living sacrifices; everything that we do should be for the glory of God. And so the Church daily decides to follow Christ and give of itself. This is our act of worship and sacrifice.

Peter names a third task of the Church that goes beyond the traditional duties of the priesthood. The priests served in house; they ministered only to the people of Israel. However, we as the Church are called to take the salvific message beyond the confines of the Church. We are also called to proclaim the praises of the God who brought us out of the darkness and into the light. Christians have been given a great task; to love and serve the world by sharing the gospel message and through physical feeding, clothing, and healing.

What does the church do? We represent God to the world, in communication, in sharing of the Gospel and physical helping, and in offering our lives to God as a sacrifice.

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3) The third question that Peter addresses is how: how do we become a part of this community? How do we join something so “holy” and “important”, something that looks so well put together when we know well and good that our lives are messed up. I think that there is a widespread fear that people with struggles or pasts cannot enter the church because the church is full of people whose lives are perfect, who have no problems. And let’s be honest, we don’t do a lot to fight those perceptions. We

come on Sunday mornings dressed in our Sunday bests, for those with children we try as hard as we can to have them act on their best behavior, when asked how we are doing we reply “Great” and proceed to talk about how good of a week we’ve had, how God has blessed us, neglecting to say how we’ve been fighting a lot with our spouse this week or that we’ve really had a hard time with money. And when it comes time to for prayer and sharing, we’re more than happy to share about sickness in the family or other people’s issues, but God forbid that we talk about our own struggles. We’ll be judged right? Somebody will be offended. And so we sit here every week pretending things are alright because we’re afraid of one another, even though that person in the seat next to you is facing struggles too. Does this ring true to anyone?

And for us who’ve been in the church for a while, we know how to play that game just fine. But for somebody new to the church atmosphere, it can be extremely intimidating to try and fit in to that.

But Peter gives us hope. He tells us that we aren’t really expected to be perfect or to hide behind facades. We are not expected to be the epitome of royal priests right away; in fact, we won’t be. But we are given a chance to grow into our faith. And this growth comes from existing within the community of the church. It comes from fellowship with other believers and through discipleship in the body of Christ. And so the cycle comes full circle.

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Peter tells us that we are being built into a spiritual house “to be” a royal priesthood. There is significance in the verb “to be” in this context because it has a dual meaning. First, it is a state of being; the Church, Christians as individuals are a royal priesthood. We exist in that state. And yet also, we are “becoming” a royal priesthood. We are developing into such. And this is the process of discipleship. It is a process which can only occur in the community of the Church.

Let’s take the life of Peter, for example. He left everything to follow Jesus, and yet it took years before he truly understood Jesus’ ministry. Even after three years, Peter did not understand that Jesus had to die in order to save us, and so he tried to violently protect Him against the Roman soldiers, even cutting off a man’s ear in the process. After Jesus was taken, Peter denied that he knew him three times. And after Jesus ascended into heaven, it took Peter a while before he was willing to agree that everyone had the right to be a part of the Church, not just the Jews. Now, just to put this into perspective, Peter is the man that Jesus called “the rock on which I will build my church.” He learned at the feet of Jesus, and guess what? Peter didn’t have it all together right away. Now, if this man, whom Jesus considered worthy of founding the Church struggled to understand faith and to follow Christ, but was given ample grace and time to learn, why do we think that we should be perfect right away? We are given the blessing of discipleship in which we are able to grow, knowing that God loves and supports us through the process.

Transition: And so we see that the church is a community of people, gathered together to form the Spiritual temple of God in this world, acting as God’s hands and feet, and learning and growing into mature disciples by being in community with one another. But, there is one more crucial component to the nature of the Church.

4) The Church is built on the cornerstone of Jesus Christ.

Peter quotes the words of Isaiah the prophet found in **Isaiah 28:16** which says:

¹⁶ So this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

“See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;
the one who relies on it
will never be stricken with panic.

In this passage Isaiah is referring to the relationship between the nation of Israel and God. Israel, relying on and placing faith in that relationship should have no fear because they are given the comfort of the Lord God. Peter used this prophetic passage as a description of Jesus Christ, the one who is the cornerstone of the church and rooted in the Father God. He tells us that if we, the Church, rely on Jesus Christ, we will face no panic, no fear, no obstacle that cannot be overcome.

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In **Ephesians 1:22-23**, Paul writes that God appointed Jesus to be in control of the church here on earth. He uses the illustration of a body, with Christ being the head and the church composing the rest of the parts.

“And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.”

What stronger foundation could anyone hope to have than the son of God?

Conclusion:

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So what is the church? It is not a building, it's not a social organization, it is not within us, and it is certainly not a place to make money. It is a community of people joining together and recognizing that we all have a desire to be filled by something other than the empty promises that the world has to offer, and as a group we are filled by God.

And what's the point? As a community of filled believers we are called to share our overflow of blessings with others. We become the mediators between sinful man and God.

And how do we become that? We are given the grace, as a people rooted in Jesus Christ the head, to learn and to grow in discipleship by being a part of the church.

May we embrace the family that we have here, the family of God, and may we shine God's light into our community and world.

