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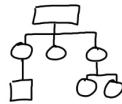
HOW DO YOU DEFINE "CHURCH"?



A.
BUILDING



B.
EVENT



C.
ORGANIZATION



D.
A COMMUNITY
LIVING IN UNION
W/ JESUS CHRIST
& EACH OTHER.

**1 IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS . . .
THEN WE MUST BE DEDICATED TO A
COMMUNITY AND NOT MERELY AN
INSTITUTION.**

THERE ARE FOUR DIFFERENT WAYS we use the word *church* in English. First, we can mean a building where religious activities occur. (Did you see the new church being built on Main Street?) Second, it may refer to an event. (I missed you at church last Sunday.) Third, we use *church* when speaking of

an institution with leaders, budgets, programs, and structures. (How much did you donate to the church last year?) Finally, the word *church* is used to identify a community—the women, men, and children redeemed by Christ living in unity with Him and each other. (The church helped us through a difficult time in our marriage.)

Which is the right definition?

That’s not really the best question. Depending on the context, any one of these four definitions may be appropriate. The better question to ask is: *How did the writers of the New Testament define the church?*

Anyone who has read even portions of the New Testament probably realizes Jesus and His apostles never equate the church with a building or an event. As an unrecognized and illegal religion, there were no buildings dedicated to the worship of Jesus Christ in the Roman Empire until the fourth century—well after the New Testament was written. And while the early Christians did meet weekly for prayer, teaching, and encouragement, these events were not called “church” but rather were understood to be gatherings *of* the church.

It’s the other two definitions of *church* that we have a much harder time distinguishing between today. Contemporary Christians often confuse and conflate the institutional structures of a local church and the spiritual community of God’s people. It is very possible to dedicate your time, treasure, and talents to an institution called a “church” but never know the mutual love, joy, hope, and support that comes when united with God’s people. Likewise, organizational structures are important. We see these begin to take shape very early in the New Testament, but

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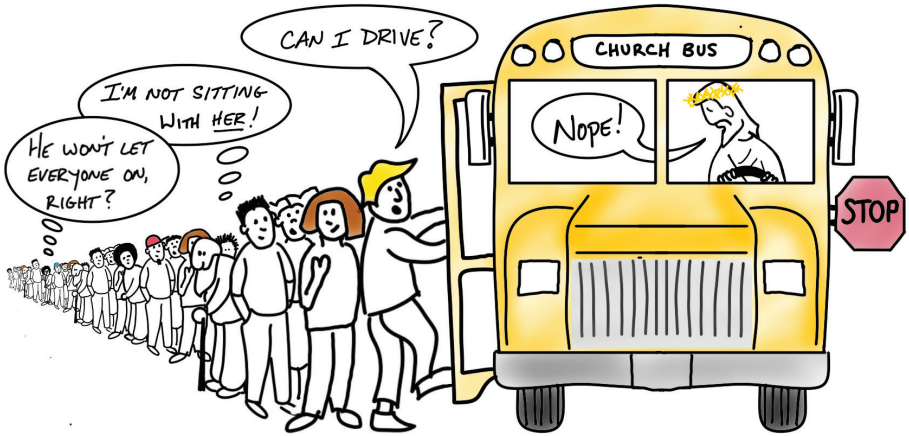
confusing the church with the structures designed to support it can lead to very dangerous things.

For example, the Bible is clear that the Spirit of God dwells within and among Christ's people, not within institutional structures. People are the vessels of God's presence, not programs. When we lose sight of this truth, it becomes all too easy to devote ourselves to the perpetuation of a particular ministry rather than to the people the ministry was intended to serve. Or we may come to believe God cares most about a certain structure, and then see His people as instruments for maintaining it when in fact it's precisely the opposite. God cares most about His people, and the structures of ministry exist to serve them.

As useful and important as institutions are, we must not forget that they exist only to foster the incarnate human connections through which the work of God is ultimately accomplished. In our highly systems-oriented, institutional age we need the discernment to recognize the difference between serving the church, serving the church through an institution, and merely serving an institution.



READ MORE: Acts 2:42–47; Ephesians 2:11–22



2

IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS . . . THEN WE MUST REMEMBER IT'S HIS CHURCH AND NOT OURS.

AMONG MARKETPLACE AND CHURCH LEADERS, two groups I often find myself with, there is a phrase you will hear a lot. “You’ve got to get the right people on your bus.” It’s a metaphor made popular by author and organizational guru Jim Collins. After studying why some businesses are able to achieve great success, Collins showed that it’s about assembling the best team—getting the right people on your bus.

I think there is a lot of wisdom to Collins’s ideas, but I also

think they get over-applied to the church. Businesses recruit, hire, promote, fire, and replace in order to assemble the best team. And while many churches also apply these marketplace strategies in an effort to get the right people on the bus, they often forget one critical fact—it's not *their* bus. The bus belongs to Jesus, and He decides who is on it even if we think they're not the "right people."

To inaugurate the kingdom of God and the reconciliation of all things, Jesus assembled a team of misfits and malcontents. They were not wise or affluent. They were not powerful or influential. To make matters worse, they didn't even share the same values, background, or politics with one another. They had no earthly reason to be together.

Consider Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot. Matthew was a Jew who worked for the Romans to take money from his own countrymen. He would have been seen as a traitor and selfish opportunist. Simon, on the other hand, was a freedom fighter, willing to take up arms to fight against the Roman occupiers.

For Jesus to call both Simon and Matthew into the same community, to be His disciples and to love one another, was absurd. No one thought a tax collector and a Zealot belonged on the same bus. And yet, after Jesus' resurrection, we read that His disciples "with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer" (Acts 1:14).

Unity is not something we find through a common interest, a mutual ethnic identity, a shared political ideology, or even a joint mission. It only comes from abiding in the same Lord. Left to ourselves, we would never associate with people we do not

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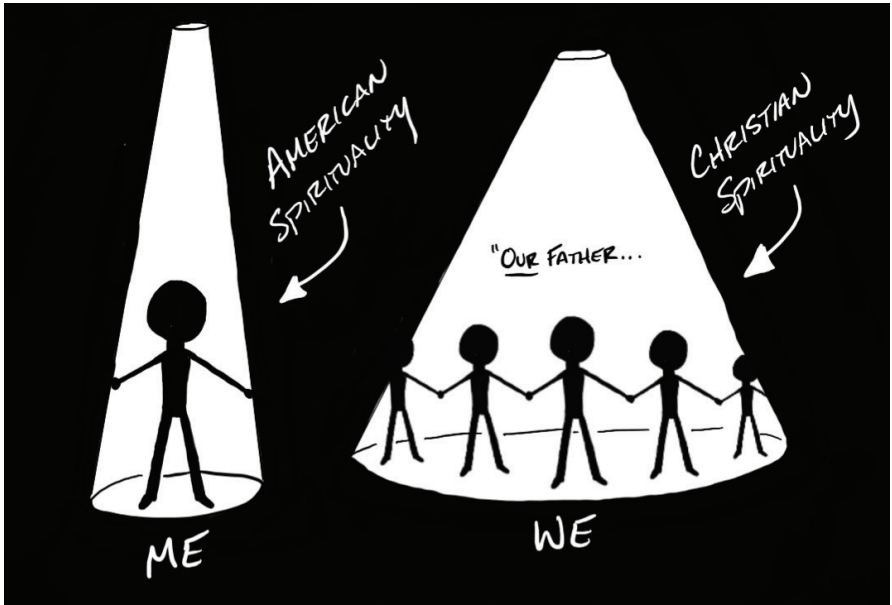
like. We would define the “right people” very differently than our Lord did, and we would probably remove the very people from the bus that He most wants on board.

This, after all, is precisely what we’re seeing in the wider American culture. An increasing number of people believe the country would be better if it did not include those who hold the opposite political or cultural views. Sadly, this same viewpoint infects many churches, and Christians in those congregations need to ask themselves what bus they think they’re on.

If your church is a homogeneous group who all share the same vision of society, politics, and culture, and if you chafe at the thought that you may be worshiping alongside someone who voted for a candidate you despise, or if anger arises when you discover a leader in your church prioritizes issues differently than you do—it’s a pretty good indication that you haven’t gotten onto Jesus’ bus. Instead, you may have invited Him onto yours.



READ MORE Acts 1:12–14; 1 Corinthians 1:10–13



3

**IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS . . .
THEN HE HAS RECONCILED
A PEOPLE, AND NOT JUST
INDIVIDUALS, TO GOD.**

CAN I HAVE A RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD without going to church? Church leaders want people to believe that church participation is important and that committing to a local congregation is part of one's Christian duty. On the other hand, the American church—perhaps more than any other—has emphasized having a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” even

though such language is not found in Scripture. The notion that it's just "me and God" fits our romantic notions of rugged individualism. Our culture champions the independent spirit of the explorer, the cowboy, the pioneer, and the entrepreneur. So, it makes sense that in the religious realm, American culture would also emphasize the individual's connection to God.

Some biblical characters appear to fit this pattern of "me and God." Think of Moses facing down the power of Egypt, or David defying the might of Goliath and the Philistine army. Daniel stands his ground repeatedly while exiled in Babylon, and eventually gets thrown to the lions as a result. Each of these stories fits our cultural narrative of the heroic individual whose faith compels him to defy both the odds and popular opinion. But a closer inspection of Scripture may reveal that the "me and God" framework is one we've imposed *on* the text rather than one we've learned *from* the text.

A closer look at Daniel's faith, for example, reveals an important challenge to our assumptions about having a "personal relationship" with God. Daniel is an unusual character in the Bible. He is one of the very few heroes without a blemish on his record. Nearly every Old Testament figure (Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, etc.) failed in a significant way or sinned dramatically against God. But not Daniel. I'm not saying Daniel never sinned, only that it's never recorded in Scripture. He seems to epitomize the rugged, righteous, individual faith our culture esteems.

That's why his prayer, recorded in Daniel 9, is so remarkable. Notice the pronouns he uses: "Lord, the great and awesome God . . . we have sinned and done wrong. *We* have

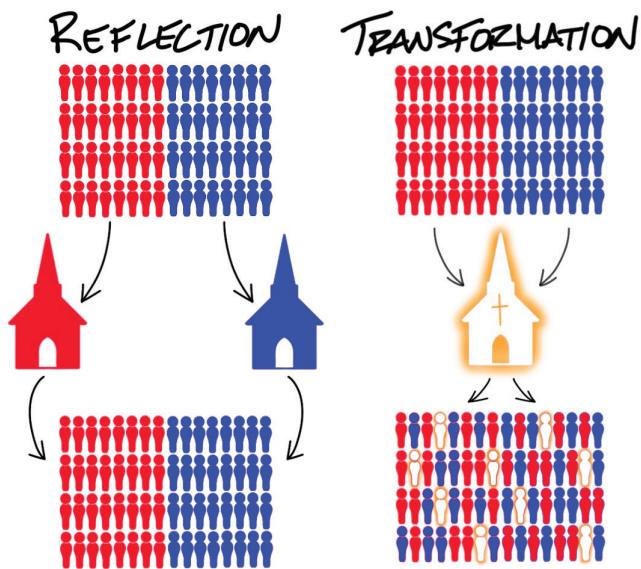
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been wicked and have rebelled; *we* have turned away from your commands and laws. *We* have not listened to your servants the prophets . . . *we* are covered with shame . . . because of *our* unfaithfulness to you. *We* and *our* kings, *our* princes and *our* ancestors are covered with shame, LORD, because *we* have sinned against you” (Dan. 9:4–8 NIV, emphasis added).

Daniel’s prayer is accurate—God’s people were guilty of sin, but there is no evidence that Daniel himself ever participated in their wickedness. So, why is he including himself in their guilt? It’s because Daniel recognized a facet of relating to God that we often overlook. While we have a “personal relationship with Jesus Christ,” we also have a collective relationship with Him. It’s not just “me and God,” it’s also “us and God.” Belonging to Christ also means belonging to His people. Sharing in His glory also means sharing in their guilt. Calling God our Father also means calling those within the church our sisters and brothers. The testimony of the Bible is clear that Jesus is not merely reconciling separate individuals but *a people* to God.



READ MORE Daniel 9:4–8; 1 Corinthians 12:14–16



4

**IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS . . .
THEN HIS CHURCH SHOULD MEND
SOCIAL DIVISIONS, NOT REFLECT
THEM.**

THE CHURCH IS CALLED to courageously and prophetically overcome the divisions of the world, but all too often it merely reflects and reinforces them. In the mid-twentieth century, as the United States was slowly integrating after centuries of racial segregation, Martin Luther King Jr. observed that eleven o'clock Sunday morning remained “the most segregated hour in this

nation.” What might surprise you is that King’s statement, which was made over fifty years ago, is just as true today.

Lifeway Research has found that 86 percent of congregations in the US remain racially homogeneous. That’s a slight improvement from the 97 percent in an earlier study. While that trajectory is encouraging, the more troubling finding from the survey was that most Christians still *prefer* a racially segregated church. The report said, “Surprisingly, most churchgoers are content with the ethnic status quo in their churches. In a world where our culture is increasingly diverse, and many pastors are talking about diversity, it appears most people are happy where they are—and with whom they are.”⁵

There are many explanations for the racial homogeneity seen in most churches, and many books have been written about it. Of course, the most obvious and innocent explanation is that some churches are located in racially homogeneous communities. It’s unlikely your church will be more diverse than the town in which it is located. But even in more diverse communities, most congregations remain homogeneous, and this is not fueled by overt or even subconscious racism. Instead, it’s driven by pragmatism. It’s far easier to lead, manage, and operate a single-culture church where there is broad agreement about music styles, program structures, leadership, and values, and historically churches have grown faster and larger when they are homogeneous. Birds of a feather, the data says, like to fellowship together.

But when we look at Jesus’ first followers and the earliest Christians through whom God shook the world, we do not see a church that valued pragmatism over diversity. For example,

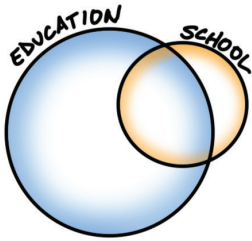
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even within the very small sample of the twelve Jesus called to be closest to Him, we discover a shocking amount of diversity. As has been said, Simon was a Zealot—a Jewish freedom fighter willing to use violence to overthrow Roman occupation—and Matthew was a tax collector—a Jew who betrayed his own people to make money by working for the Romans.

And yet, Jesus called both of these men not only to be His disciples, but He called them to embrace each other as brothers. What united Simon and Matthew wasn't a common political, cultural, or economic vision. It was Jesus and nothing else. God calling these two men together wasn't practical, but it was beautiful. Isn't that what the church, and the world, need right now?

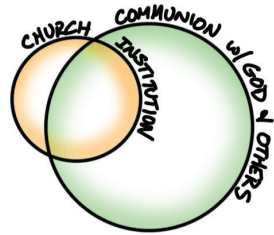


READ MORE: Ephesians 4:1–6; Luke 6:12–19



"I NEVER LET SCHOOLING
INTERFERE WITH MY EDUCATION."
- MARK TWAIN

"NEVER LET CHURCH STRUCTURES
LIMIT YOUR COMMUNION WITH GOD."
- SKYE JETHANI



5

IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS . . . THEN OUR GOAL SHOULD BE MORE THAN ATTENDING CHURCH.

LIKE MANY OTHER FAMILIES, our normal routines were significantly impacted by the pandemic in 2020. My kids were in middle school, high school, and college at the time. For much of the year, none of their schools were meeting in person. Thankfully, with or without entering a school building or sitting in a classroom, everyone agreed that their education had to continue. The unusual circumstances surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic reminded many of us that education and

schooling are not synonymous. As Mark Twain reportedly said, “I never let my schooling interfere with my education.” During 2020, my parental responsibility was to educate my kids, not just school them.

Just as the pandemic taught us of the difference between school (an institution) and education (the institution’s purpose), we need to have a similar awakening about the church. As mentioned earlier, about thirty years ago, a new word entered our Christian lexicon that has blurred the line between the church institution and its purpose. Prior generations spoke about believers or unbelievers, Christians and non-Christians, but today it’s not uncommon to speak of the *churched* or *unchurched*. I worry that this language, which is incredibly common among pastors, conflates the institution with its purpose. It assumes the goal is to get someone “churched” and that success is the perpetuation of the institution itself. This is a shortsighted vision, like a school awarding diplomas merely for attending rather than for learning.

Just as it is possible to attend school and not be educated, it is entirely possible to be churched and not be living in communion with Christ—especially when *church* is defined institutionally rather than communally. The church has a vital and undeniable role to play in our spiritual formation—one that too many Christians ignore. At the same time, the institutional church cannot be the only source for our development as Christians and it cannot encompass the entirety of our life with God. There are other resources, relationships, personal practices, and acts of service that draw us into deeper communion with Christ beyond Sunday morning worship or

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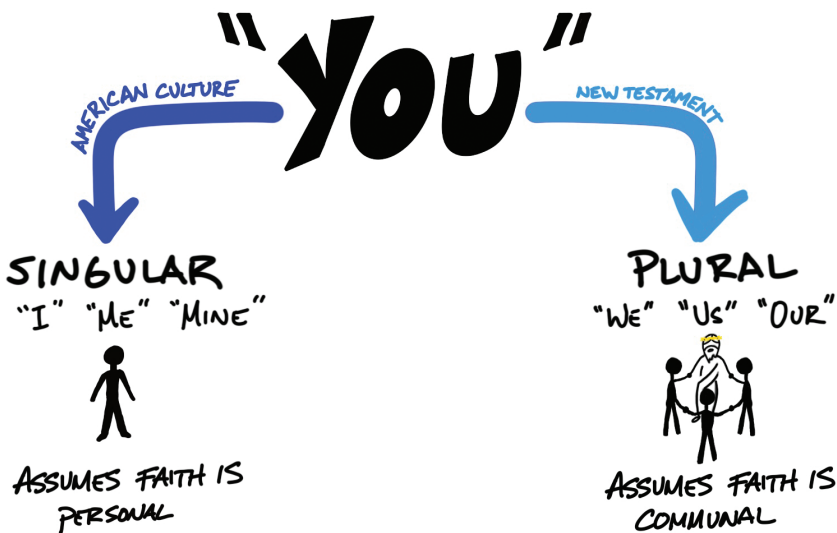
the programs of our local congregation. Just as our education is bigger than our school, so our life with God must be bigger than the institution of the church.

Back in 2014, we took our kids out of school to travel overseas. For those few weeks, we concluded their education would be advanced more by *not* attending school—and their teachers agreed. They recognized the ultimate goal was education, not just school attendance, and the teachers worked with us to develop a customized plan for all three kids. It was a wonderful example of thoughtful and caring people putting the goal and the institution in their proper places.

Likewise, the institutional church is an incredible gift, but we must remember that it is a means to an end. The institution does not exist for itself.



READ MORE: 2 Peter 1:3–9; John 4:19–26



6

**IF JESUS WAS SERIOUS . . .
THEN FOLLOWING JESUS ISN'T
ABOUT ME, IT'S ABOUT US.**

IN CASE YOU WERE UNAWARE, the Bible was not written in the twenty-first century, nor was it written in English. It is an ancient book (technically it's a collection of ancient books) originally composed in Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament). While most modern English versions are incredibly well researched and composed, inevitably some things get lost in translation.

For example, there is no unique second-person plural

pronoun in English. We say “you” whether speaking to an individual or to a group (except in the South where “y’all” attempts to fill in the gap). This lack of nuance in English, when combined with our strong cultural value of individualism, can profoundly warp the way we read Scripture.

Most of the apostolic letters, which make up most of the New Testament, were not written to individuals but to churches. Therefore, when we encounter the word “you” in these writings it is most often *plural*, but the English reader has no way of knowing that apart from the wider context and an awareness of the apostle’s original audience. Simply put, in most cases, the apostles are not speaking to *me*, but to *us*. They were instructing communities and only rarely commanding individuals. A significant amount of the Bible’s teaching makes little sense or can be dangerously misapplied if divorced from a communal vision of Christian faith.

Unfortunately, that is exactly what many of us do. Our American individualism combined with the limitations of English mean we often assume the text is speaking to *me*, and the corporate application the apostles intended is far from our imaginations. Our minds are simply not trained to think collectively, so we tend to confine and individualize the text. We emphasize the “personal relationship with God” bias of consumeristic Christianity and overlook our corporate identity as a member of Christ’s body—the church.

Most of us are never going to learn Greek or Hebrew, and we can’t just change the English language. (Although teenagers are trying—when did “literally” start to mean “figuratively”?) That means we need to engage Scripture carefully with an

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awareness of our own cultural biases and blind spots. We need to slow down every time we encounter the word “you” in a New Testament letter and ask ourselves not only how this applies to *me*, but also what it means for *us*.



READ MORE: 1 Corinthians 3:5–19; 1 Peter 2:4–10