



The Vine Movement

SUPPORTING
GOSPEL GROWTH
BEYOND
YOUR CHURCH

MIKEY LYNCH

Praise for *The Vine Movement*

This is a very useful, brush-clearing book to help both church and parachurch leaders navigate the tension and complexity of moving beyond their individual mission statements to partner together in the mission of the gospel.

Todd Adkins

Co-founder, Lifeway Leadership Podcast Network
Director of Leadership Development, Lifeway Christian Resources,
Nashville, TN

Local church leaders can sometimes characterize parachurches as unbiblical, arrogant and distracting. Parachurch leaders can sometimes stereotype local churches as cumbersome, dogmatic and slow. Mikey Lynch offers us a different take. Theologically rich and nuanced, and full of wisdom and practical insight, *The Vine Movement* can inspire us to relate with discernment, appreciation, honour and love for those serving in different parts of the vineyard to us—and to actively collaborate in cultivating a gospel ecosystem.

Peter Dray

Director of Creative Evangelism, UCCF: The Christian Unions, UK

Hilarious, provocative, biblical, historical, concrete and extremely helpful. It is my prayer that Mikey's book will help both denominational churches and parachurches to understand one another better and to work brilliantly together to proclaim Christ.

Ben Pfahlert

National Director, Ministry Training Strategy, Australia

Mikey Lynch brings a winsome blend of intellectual curiosity and generosity to the thorny problem of church and parachurch ministry. As someone who frequently works in the intersection of these kinds of organizations, I found this book to be a rare combination of careful theological insight and practical wisdom. The clarity of Lynch's discussion of the doctrine of church in the opening section is worth the price of the book alone. I've already found myself recommending it to campus ministry workers and church pastors who are wrestling with how their different ministry models fit together to serve the kingdom.

Dan Anderson

Director, The Lachlan Macquarie Institute, Canberra
Chair of the Board, Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students
Former Anglican Chaplain, Robert Menzies College, Macquarie University,
Sydney

Mikey Lynch has written a brilliant book on a vital topic for anyone concerned about the mission of Jesus. Good material on the relationship between the church and the parachurch is surprisingly rare. What is written can sometimes come from a narrow theological perspective, arguing for the value of the one over the other without a practical sense of how mission actually proceeds in the world. Or they can be highly pragmatic, promoting 'whatever works' over what is true and biblical. Mikey, by combining a first-rate theological mind with long and fruitful experience in both church and parachurch ministry, has brought together what is too often apart: theological depth and practical mission experience. I firmly believe this will become the one-stop, go-to book on the subject for years to come.

Rory Shiner

Senior Pastor, Providence City Church, Perth
Network Director, Providence Church Network

As someone with a foot firmly planted in both my local Chinese church and the parachurch that employs me, I've always been fascinated by the relationship between churches and parachurches. Is the parachurch something to be avoided or embraced? Thanks to Mikey Lynch's detailed analysis, I am all the more excited to see how I can best serve God's kingdom in both my church and parachurch.

Sam Chan

Public Speaker, City Bible Forum, Australia

Partnerships between local churches and parachurch organizations provide wonderful opportunities for the growth of the gospel, but too often are fraught with tension and misunderstanding. Mikey Lynch has done us a great service by giving a clear theological foundation for these relationships. He establishes the priority of local church ministry and explores the relationship between local churches and denominational and parachurch organizations in a range of contexts.

David Williams

Director of Training and Development, Church Missionary Society,
Australia

As someone who trains Christian people for chaplaincy and pastoral care ministries, both within the public sector and parachurch organizations, I see people struggle to know where their ministries connect with more traditional church ministries. In this important project, Mikey Lynch explores the assumed (but largely unexamined) relationship between churches and parachurch organizations and ministries. *The Vine Movement* is a helpful attempt to describe existing parameters that differentiate between church and para-

church, and then to demonstrate faithful ways of integrating both ministries in a way that honours each one's alignment with Christ and his mission while respecting the remit of the other. This work would be of interest both at an organizational level, and for individuals wishing to understand their place in a larger whole.

Kate Bradford

Chaplain and Pastoral Supervisor, Anglicare, Sydney

The Vine Movement is an ambitious but careful examination of the relationship between the local church and various parachurch ministries. Mikey Lynch demonstrates that, while the local church has spiritual authority, parachurches can deepen the growth of the kingdom in unique and vital ways. This book explains all this and also provides practical advice for how to productively navigate the relationship between the local church and parachurch ministry in the midst of our fallen world.

Luke Isham

Minister, St Kilda & Balaclava Presbyterian Church, Melbourne

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Geoff Robson, for his thoughtful and thorough editing, including lots of probing questions and good humour along the way.

To David N Jones, whose life and library was a formative model for my Christian mind and ministry.

His churchmanship, his commitment to gospel growth beyond any one church or denomination, and his confidence that Christ will build his church all embody the central ideas of this book.

To K John Smith, a creative, compassionate and courageous pioneer of Australian church and parachurch ministry, from whose legacy we all benefit.



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Foreword

Where would we be today without the many parachurch movements that began to either reform or enhance the organized church? Some of these became formally connected to churches, while others stimulated local churches to develop new ministries and outreaches. But many became long-term organizations of their own.

In 1530, St Ignatius of Loyola led a movement of people who wanted to be more deeply committed, so formed the Soldiers of Christ. In 1540, the Roman Catholic Church, seeing their strength and growth, brought them into the fold as an order.

In 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the church door in Wittenberg, Germany. This time, the Roman Catholic Church was unable to contain the division, resulting in the Reformation.

In the 1780s in Britain, Anglican evangelical Robert Raikes and others created the Sunday School movement to minister to children caught in the Industrial Revolution. At first, it was not readily accepted in the church. But soon this parachurch movement became an integral part of local churches in Britain and America.

In 1179, Peter Waldo, an ordinary layman, asked Pope Alexander III for a preaching licence. It was granted as long as he was under the supervision of local clergy. This became the Waldensian Movement, which, notably, was a movement of lay-

men. In 1184, Waldo was excommunicated by Pope Lucius III.

In the late 1700s, William Carey (often called the father of modern missions), a layman and shoemaker, had a vision for sending missionaries to India. He left the Anglican Church, became a Particular Baptist pastor, and founded the Particular Baptist Society for the Propagation of the Gospel Among the Heathen (later the Baptist Missionary Society). He took his mission outside the local church.

In the 1930s and 40s, there was an explosion of parachurch organizations such as The Navigators, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ (now Cru), Young Life, Youth for Christ, and many others. Notably, again, most were begun by laymen.

Indeed, many of today's parachurch organizations were started and are staffed by laymen and women. The parachurch movement has become an avenue of ministry for those who did not have the benefit of theological education or ordination. To be fair, of course, local churches and denominations desperately attempt to engage laymen and women meaningfully in a myriad of ministries; they are not opposed to significant lay involvement.

In 1983, I wrote *The Church and the Parachurch* at the direct request of Dr Joe Aldrich (then President of Multnomah School of the Bible and Multnomah Press). I asked him, "Why would I write a book that neither church or parachurch leaders will like?" He said simply that the topic needed to be addressed. At the time, there were about 10,000 Christian parachurch organizations. I predicted that this would increase to several times that. Some wrote in response that the parachurch movement would die. Today, there are more than 90,000 such groups in the United States alone.

Mikey Lynch has produced a wonderfully written and researched book to address both the theological and practical aspects of the tensions, realities and complementary ministries of the local church and the parachurch. My early research pales in comparison to the detailed and definitive research that Lynch has done. He is thorough, balanced, critical, discerning and arti-

culate in presenting the theological foundations, or lack thereof, of both structures.

I initially planned to scan the book then write this foreword. But I was irresistibly drawn to read it in great detail. It is so carefully researched and even-handed in presenting opposing viewpoints as well as being intensely theological. At the same time, it is profoundly practical, with cogent suggestions and warnings for both church and parachurch.

This is the most definitive and insightful book that has been written in recent history on this very important aspect of God's kingdom work. At a time when churches are proliferating outside denominational control and when parachurches continue to form, we must learn how to work together for the cause of the gospel. Conceptually, there is a broad agreement across the body of Christ that both structures are valid and needed. But as we say, theologically, "the devil is in the details"!

Like the saying that all politics are local, so all applications of church and parachurch dynamics are local. We can agree on general principles and even theology, but struggles ensue at the local level where personalities and programs dominate, and conflict and misunderstandings can result. Lynch rightly emphasizes the importance of relationships and communication.

Ultimately, we need to see all of these issues from the perspective of the kingdom of God. No one church or parachurch meets every purpose of the kingdom. God works in ways beyond our understanding or plans. He is at work far beyond any structures that we create—church or parachurch. Finally, most fundamentally, we must not focus on organizations or churches, but on individuals who come to faith and are disciplined to maturity. It is individual men, women and children who are reached with the gospel and who mature in the faith. They are not pawns in our systems, but the very heart of what we as the body of Christ are about. We are guided by Paul's words in Colossians 1:

To [his saints] God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this

mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Him we proclaim, warning *everyone* and teaching *everyone* with all wisdom, that we may present *everyone* mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me. (Col 1:27-29, ESV)

Our work is profoundly personal.

May we in churches and parachurches keep this in mind as we pursue our mission and vision, realizing and committing to the gospel in all its fullness, and proclaiming it to every person.

That's why this book is so important. Mikey Lynch has given us both a roadmap and detailed guidelines, buttressed with a sound biblical foundation, to help us in the task.

Jerry E White, PhD

International President Emeritus, The Navigators

Author, *The Church and the Parachurch: An Uneasy Marriage*

Major General, United States Air Force, retired



Introduction

The *Trellis and the Vine* gives a vision for word-centred disciple making in the local church and beyond.¹ It is something of a manifesto for a simple, biblical view of Christian ministry. The central metaphor of the book describes spiritual disciple-making ministry as the ‘vine’, which is helped to grow by the ‘trellises’ of infrastructure and governance. Colin Marshall and Tony Payne explain their central metaphor like this:

The basic work of any Christian ministry is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in the power of God’s Spirit, and to see people converted, changed and grow to maturity in that gospel. That’s the work of planting, watering, fertilizing and tending the vine.

However, just as some sort of framework is needed to help a vine grow, so Christian ministries also need some structure and support. It may not be much, but at the very least we need somewhere to meet, some Bibles to read from, and some basic structures of leadership within our group. All Christian churches, fellowships or ministries have some kind of trellis that gives shape and support to the work.²

1 C Marshall and T Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine: The ministry mind-shift that changes everything*, Matthias Media, 2009.

2 Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, p 8.

For many who have read and loved this book over the past ten years, *The Trellis and the Vine* has given an affirming clarity as they read in print convictions they were already working out in practice. Others have been jolted into focus as they realized how they had drifted from the core priorities of Christian ministry. For as the authors warn, “that’s the thing about trellis work: it tends to take over from vine work”.³ Many have found it useful to pass on to their church leadership teams and pastors-in-training, to also establish them in its ministry mindset.

The power of *The Trellis and the Vine* lies not so much in Marshall and Payne pioneering new ideas, but in the way they express basic truths in a sharp and direct way and tease out the necessary implications of these truths with a kind of delightful, challenging and inspiring inevitability.

In *The Vine Project*, Marshall and Payne both build on and deepen the theological convictions in *The Trellis and the Vine*, but also lay out a helpful process by which leaders can review, renew and refocus a local church around these convictions.⁴

Building trellises for the global vine

Both books are clear that the rule of Christ extends to the ends of the earth and that the individual Christian and the local church should be concerned about global mission: “The parable of the trellis and the vine is not just a picture of the struggles of my own local church; it’s also a picture of the progress of the gospel in my street and suburb and city and world.”⁵

After all, most of us are the fruit of the global mission: we *are* ‘the nations’ to which those original disciples were sent.⁶ Our primary concern, therefore, ought not to be a narrow conception of local church growth, but rather ‘gospel growth’:

3 Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, p 9.

4 C Marshall and T Payne, *The Vine Project: Shaping your ministry culture around disciple-making*, Matthias Media, 2016.

5 Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, pp 10-11.

6 Marshall and Payne, *The Vine Project*, p 130.

It's interesting how little the New Testament talks about church growth, and how often it talks about 'gospel growth' or the increase of the 'word' ... Returning to our vine metaphor, the vine is the Spirit-empowered word, spreading and growing throughout the world, drawing people out of the kingdom of darkness into the light-filled kingdom of God's beloved Son, and then bearing fruit in their lives as they grow in the knowledge and love of God ...

This results, of course, in individual congregations growing and being built. But the emphasis is not on the growth of the congregation as a structure—in numbers, finances and success—but on the growth of the gospel, as it is spoken and re-spoken under the power of the Spirit.⁷

This requires not just thinking about the 'vine work' in our local church, but also the process of transplanting new 'vines', and the building of new 'trellises' to support these vines in new areas—locally, regionally and globally; in other words, church planting. As Marshall and Payne write: "the gospel is growing throughout the world like a vine whose tendrils keep spreading across the fence, and over the fence, and into the neighbour's backyard."⁸ Such 'vine work' will require new 'trellises' to equip, send and support new works. And eventually they create new networks of trellises and vines, whether informal connections or formal denominations and mission societies.

The focus of *The Vine Project* is purposefully and unapologetically the local church. The church is central to God's ultimate purposes and so of vital importance to our faithful and fruitful obedience to his Great Commission.

This means, however, that there remains plenty of space to explore further the implications of a word-centred disciple-making 'vine' ministry beyond the local church. The organic focus on disciple making rightly opens us to thinking beyond the local

7 Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, p 37.

8 Marshall and Payne, *The Trellis and the Vine*, p 81.

church or the denomination—for wherever the people of God can go with the word of God, there the vine can spread. It is fitting for our trellises to have to play catch-up to the wonderful ways in which Christ works through his people in building his church in the world.

The gospel ecosystem

When this larger vine becomes healthy and vigorous, we end up with a whole ‘gospel ecosystem’, as Tim Keller calls it:

Just as a biological ecosystem is made of interdependent organisms, systems, and natural forces, a gospel ecosystem is made of interdependent organizations, individuals, ideas, and spiritual and human forces. When all the elements of an ecosystem are in place and in balance, the entire system produces health and growth as a whole and for the elements themselves.⁹

Such an ecosystem, Keller writes, includes not only “church planting and church renewal movements” but also “a complex set of specialty ministries, institutions, networks, and relationships”, including:

1. a prayer movement uniting churches across traditions in visionary intercession for the city
2. a number of specialized evangelistic ministries, reaching particular groups (business people, mothers, ethnicities, and the like)
3. an array of justice and mercy ministries, addressing every possible social problem and neighbourhood
4. faith and work initiatives and fellowship in which Christians from across the city gather with others in the same profession

9 T Keller, *Center Church: Doing balanced, gospel-centered ministry in your city*, Zondervan, 2012, p 371.

5. institutions that support family life in the city, especially schools and counselling services
6. systems for attracting, developing, and training urban church and ministry leaders
7. an unusual unity of Christian city leaders.¹⁰

Those of us who give and pray and serve and lead need to reflect together on how we can help tend this complex ecosystem. This is more than pruning a single vine or even managing a single suburban garden. Just as there is a global ecology, there is a global *gospel* ecology. Alongside the practical complexity of tending wisely to this gospel ecosystem, there is also the theological complexity of thinking faithfully about it. This challenge is felt even by the keen individual Christian: what stuff should I get involved with?

About me

My Christian life and ministry have been entangled with both church and parachurch work all the way along. I was baptized as a child in an Anglican church, but my family were not regular churchgoers. I attended church schools and learned much about the gospel in religious education classes, chapel services, and conversations with chaplains. In fact, it was at an evangelistic event hosted during one of Scotch College Melbourne's school mission weeks that I was first truly shaken to seriously consider the gospel by guest speaker Ian Powell. I came to faith several years later, after my family moved to Hobart. This was through a combination of: attending church on Sunday at St John's Presbyterian Church; informal evangelistic Bible studies (Scripture Under Scrutiny, or SUS for short) with Jo, a woman from the church; involvement in events hosted by the Australian Fellowship of Evangelical Students (AFES) ministry at the University

¹⁰ Keller, *Center Church*, pp 374-376.

of Tasmania; and reading books by CS Lewis, John Chapman, Francis Schaeffer, Josh McDowell, and others.

Since then, I have been involved in all sorts of ministries: teaching Scripture in a local primary school under the umbrella of the Tasmanian Council of Churches; leading on Anglican Camping Tasmania Youth Camps; and serving as a member of an open-air preaching circus group, ‘The Trinity Troupe.’ I was a founder and editor of a short-lived, small-circulation zine called *Regurgitator* in the early 2000s. I have blogged at Christian Reflections since 2006, published a couple of books, and helped launch a few podcasts. I served for seven years as an ordained elder and unordained pastor (‘Home Missionary’) of the church I helped to plant, Crossroads Presbyterian Church, and so was also a member of the local Presbytery of Derwent and General Assembly of Tasmania.

I have now worked for ten years on staff for AFES at the University of Tasmania. I became a founding director of The Vision 100 Network (Tasmania) and The Geneva Push (National)—both church-planting networks—in 2002 and 2008, respectively. I served as the Tasmanian Network Coordinator for the Ministry Training Strategy (MTS) from 2008 until 2018, and as a chaplain for Jane Franklin Hall residential college from 2009 until 2020. In 2005, I gathered together a team of Christian IT volunteers which has since grown into the not-for-profit ministry New Front Door: the Church IT Guild.

In all of this, I have struggled practically and theologically with how church and parachurch work together well, fielded all sorts of suggestions and objections, and have at various times been either deeply frustrated or profoundly inspired.

In this book, I draw on all of these experiences, together with the experiences of my friends and colleagues and the lessons I have been able to glean from the practical and theological reflection of others throughout church history. This is very much a practical book, not merely a theoretical book.

What does healthy vine work look like when applied to the local university Christian Union? The combined evangelistic effort

of a regional town? The global mission society? How can our trellises help or hinder this wider work? How do we uphold the value of the local church even as we unleash God's people with the gospel word? And what do we make of other Christian enterprises that spring up in the church and beyond—those that are not focused primarily on the ministry of the word? As God's people eager to do good, we will be busy not only with disciple making, but also with all sorts of good deeds in charity, community, art, education, health and politics. Where do these deeds belong, and how do they relate to our disciple-making ministries? These are the types of questions that this book attempts to answer.

How do we serve beyond the local church?

There are so many ways we could serve the cause of the gospel. Look on any brochure table or noticeboard in almost any church foyer across the country and you will find conferences, workshops, outreaches, mission societies, fellowships, collectives and lobby groups to address a whole range of internal and external needs. You can grow in your Bible knowledge, be supported in your parenting, overcome an addiction, reach out to prison inmates, fund clean water, advocate for refugees, engage in open-air preaching, reconnect with your manhood or womanhood, be refreshed as a pastor, evangelize and equip university students, start prayer teams in the workplace, form your Christian worldview, and on and on it goes. And each of these groups wants you to pray for them, give to them, and roll up your sleeves and get involved with them.

So how do you choose where to put your time, energy, money, prayers, and passion?

In the first place, this is a question of Christian wisdom, freedom, and decision making—matters I covered in my previous book, *The Good Life in the Last Days*.¹¹ In that book, I argued that

¹¹ M Lynch, *The Good Life in the Last Days: Making choices when the time is short*, Matthias Media, 2018.

God made the world complex, so that there will usually be competing priorities and no easy answers for what exactly we should be doing. It's complicated, but that's the way God made the world to be. We can attain some clarity about the best way to live when we think about our individuality and our unique circumstances. Since we are not omnipresent and omnipotent, we have particular responsibilities and abilities; we don't have to care about and do something about absolutely everything. But we are also blessed with genuine Christian freedom to choose between multiple good things. This means that I get to—and *have* to—wisely exercise my Christian freedom in choosing which conferences and ministries I get involved with, and how much I give and serve. There is no single ratio of family life, secular work, recreation, Bible convention attendance, charitable work, political advocacy and parachurch evangelism I must conform to.

But to fully inform my Christian freedom so I can make a wise choice, I must reflect not only on my unique context and circumstances, but also on the unique nature of the various activities I could be involved in. What is Christian charity work? What is a university Christian Union (CU)? What are these things we often group together with the term 'parachurch'?¹² For that matter, what is a local church? And how are the church and parachurch different or similar? Is one more important or less important than the other?

I think most Christians have a hunch that the local church has a special place in God's purposes, but what does this mean for all the other Christian organizations I could be involved with? Without having clarity on these kinds of questions, it's difficult to see the way forward.

In fact, there are questions that are even more complicated:

- What is the relationship between the missionary society, the indigenous church, and the sending church?

¹² The word 'parachurch' simply means 'alongside the church' (the Greek preposition 'para' means 'alongside').

- What is the responsibility of the church for organizing works of charity in the community? What is its responsibility for political advocacy? What should be its connection to external Christian organizations that do these things?
- What is the nature, authority and importance of the denomination? Is the denomination properly seen to be the ‘regional church’, or is it in fact a kind of parachurch?
- What account should Christian publishing houses, theological colleges, bloggers, podcasters and YouTubers be held to?
- How should the biblical principles about church discipline, leadership appointment and the ordering of church gatherings apply to the membership, leadership and meetings of parachurch groups?

It is important for all mature Christians to wrestle with these issues. As we all live out our faith by being active in the work of the Lord, we all have to think through how to serve the gospel both within and beyond the local church. The Lausanne occasional paper on church/parachurch relationships describes the range of people for whom it was written:

... for those actually involved out there in “striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” ... for the pastor in a small town, the organisation staff member in a city suburb, the denominational leader in danger of getting out of touch, and the Bible school or seminary teacher whose seed thoughts will grow into fruit-actions, whether they are right or wrong.

It is a down-to-earth document, grappling positively with the facts of disharmony and disunity. It is for those of us desperately concerned and deeply involved in the task of world evangelization, often “you in your small corner, and I in mine.”¹³

13 Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization Commission on Co-operation, *Cooperating in World Evangelization: A handbook on church/para-church relationships*, Lausanne Occasional Paper 24. The Lausanne Movement website, 1 March 1983, p 14, accessed 6 September 2022 (lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-24).

This very much reflects my purpose, too—although I would add that, as well as writing for staff and ordained leaders, I am also writing for anyone who participates in and benefits from parachurch ministries.

About *The Vine Movement*

In part 1 of this book, I lay down some theological foundations to help us think clearly about the nature of the church, the parachurch, denominations, and the kingdom of God. While some might be tempted to skip over part 1 to get to ‘the practical stuff’, it is a very important basis for all the practical recommendations that follow.

In part 2, I draw together these ideas and provide principles and suggestions for how to establish healthy patterns of relationship between church and parachurch ministries, both locally and globally. The focus of my recommendations is not how to start and manage a parachurch ministry,¹⁴ but rather the healthy interaction between church and parachurch.

Lastly, in part 3, I will go into more detail about particular kinds of parachurch organizations, seeking to draw from the biblical teaching, learn from historical case studies, and provide some practical principles for every Christian. This section is ‘applied missiology, ecclesiology and ethics’, with a good dose of church history thrown in. At many points, it is not so black and white; it’s a synthesizing of theological and moral principles into practical recommendations. You don’t need to read the whole of part 3 from beginning to end; perhaps you will prefer to find the category of parachurch that you are most engaged with and read that chapter. While *The Vine Movement* can be enjoyed as one long book, it can also be used (especially part 3) as a collection of discussion papers as needed.

¹⁴ For practical advice in this area, see WK Willmer, JD Schmidt and M Smith, *The Prospering Parachurch: Enlarging the boundaries of God’s kingdom*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998.

The exciting possibility is that the gospel might spread more rapidly, believers might become more Christlike, and good deeds might abound, all through the partnership of churches and para-church ministries. The book is written to help God's people be principled, strategic and generous, so that para-churches might be effective in a way that also honours and encourages healthy local churches, and so that local churches might proactively support the wider work of God's people in the world.



PART 1 //

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS



Chapter 1: What is the church?¹

Yumin started to crochet when she broke her leg. She had nothing to do. She couldn't go bushwalking or kayaking like she normally did; she was stuck sitting down. It was a strange hobby for her, not the kind of thing she imagined herself ever doing. But her sister was expecting a baby and she thought she'd make her a cute little hat. And besides, it was short term, just while she healed up and got back on her feet and into the great outdoors again.

Except that it wasn't. She'd caught the bug.

Of course, Yumin got back into her active hobbies when the cast was removed and the doctor gave her the green light. But she didn't put away the crochet hook, either. She started working on more ambitious patterns, and sniffing around for other people to make things for. Eventually, at the urging of friends and family, she launched a website—Leaf & Lark—to sell some of the items she was making. And it began to do quite well. She was not only covering the costs of materials but was making more money besides, which was nice because it didn't feel like

1 An earlier version of this material was delivered in seminar form in 2018 for the University Fellowship of Christians, Hobart, and in sermon form in 2019 at Crossroads Presbyterian Church in Hobart.

work. She was being paid for doing something she'd do anyway. She was living the dream!

But was her new crochet site a business or a hobby? She didn't even think this was a question worth asking, until an uncle raised the question at a family gathering: "Do you have an ABN?"² Oh dear. Ignorance was bliss, but suddenly a whole new world of questions opened up before her. Yumin used Google to help her figure out if Leaf & Lark qualified as a business or a hobby. She began to drown in fact sheets and online self-assessment checklists, each covering slightly different factors and each annoyingly vague and occasionally kind of contradictory. The Australian Tax Office is reluctant to give a simplistic answer to the question "When does a hobby become a business?" but it recognizes that there is a difference between the two. Rather than offering a simple definition, they provide information that is intended to add up to a clear answer.

In these next two chapters, I will argue that the difference between a church and a parachurch is quite similar to the difference between a business and a hobby. If our theological principles and definitions are too simplistic, then we end up reaching quite extreme conclusions such as 'every parachurch really is a church' or 'all parachurches are bad'. Instead, we need to have a clear understanding of how the Bible defines a church, and then think carefully about how this understanding helps us to define all the other activities and organizations Christians might be involved in.

So what is the church?

The universal church

When we think about the church, we must not immediately jump to thinking about Sunday services, parish councils and crèche rosters. The church is very different to a secular business at this point.

² Australian Business Number.

In the first place, the church is *the heavenly gathering of all those saved by Christ*. The Greek words translated in most of our English translations as ‘church’ mean ‘assembly’, ‘gathering’ or ‘congregation’. The particular ‘gathering’ that is the church of Christ is spiritual, heavenly, universal and glorious. This is pictured beautifully in Hebrews 12:

You have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. (Heb 12:22-24)

How can it be said that we “have come” to the heavenly Jerusalem—not that we are “going to come”, but we “have come”? In what sense are we Christians, scattered throughout the world, actually assembled with the “church of the firstborn”, together with God and his angels? It doesn’t feel like that. I’m sitting on my couch, with a cup of coffee on my left and my dog curled up asleep on my right. Is this just a statement of the future reality we share—a reality so certain that we can say it has come, because God has promised it to us?³

I think it’s stronger than that. There is a genuine sense in which we *really have come* to a heavenly assembly. The answer lies in our spiritual *union with Christ* by his Spirit. Because of our spiritual union with Christ, we are spiritually “seated ... with him in the heavenly realms” (Eph 2:6). And because all Christians are united with Christ, we are also all united to one another. To be saved is to be united with Christ together with all his people in Christ.

3 Chase Kuhn unpacks various approaches to this question in CR Kuhn, *The Ecclesiology of Donald Robinson and D. Broughton Knox: Exposition, analysis, and theological evaluation*. Wipf and Stock, 2017, pp 105-110, 187-190.

Consider the way in which the book of Ephesians speaks about the church. The church is made up of those who are “blessed ... in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose [them] in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight” (1:3-4). The blessings we have received in him are listed in verses 4 to 14: election for holiness; predestination for adoption; redemption and forgiveness; revelation of his end-time purposes; and sealing by the Holy Spirit. All these blessings came to us when we were “included in Christ” (v 13).

This union with Christ is explored further in the next chapter:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus. (Eph 2:4-7)

This glorious spiritual union is what lies behind the reality of the universal church that we read about in Hebrews 12. The church is the full number of all those who are truly united to Christ by faith and have truly received all the benefits of his death for sins and resurrection to new life. Those for whom Christ died ought to be thought of together, as his church whom he loved:

Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. (Eph 5:25b-27)

The church is a spiritual reality constituted by Christ and his gospel.

This same reality is described in Ephesians with other words: Christ’s “body” and “one new humanity” (2:15-16), and “God’s people”, God’s “household” and “a holy temple” (2:19-21). Not only

are we ‘in Christ’, but Christ is ‘in us’ through the Holy Spirit (2:22; 3:16-17, 19; 5:18).⁴

Other terms used elsewhere in Scripture include “vine” (John 15:1-17), “flock” (Acts 20:28), “olive tree” (Rom 11:17-24), “Abraham’s seed” (Gal 3:29), “royal priesthood” and “holy nation” (1 Pet 2:9), “foreigners and exiles” (1 Pet 2:11), “the lady chosen by God” (2 John 1), and “bride” (Rev 19:7). Each image contains its own emphasis, and therefore we must not assume that they refer to precisely the same thing. For example, not every term contains the idea of ‘gathering’, as the word ‘church’ does; and some of them, such as ‘foreigners’, describe God’s people only as we are in this age, rather than as we will be in eternity. But taken together, these descriptions give us a fuller picture of who God’s people are.

The ancient Nicene Creed describes the church less metaphorically as “one holy catholic and apostolic church”, a string of adjectives that unpack for us the church’s nature. There is only *one* church, gathered around Christ, and so it must be *catholic* (i.e. universal): all those who have faith in Christ are included in his church, no matter who they are, where they are from, or what they have done. The church belongs to God, and so it is *holy*: it is credited with the righteousness of Christ, and so declared to be holy, and its members are called to live holy lives—a calling which will reach its perfection in our resurrection and glorification. And the church is constituted and ruled by the *apostolic* word about Christ and his saving work: “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone,” as Ephesians 2:20 puts it.

So what is the church? The Westminster Confession of Faith summarizes it well:

The catholic or universal Church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ

4 Miroslav Volf describes the church as “the mutual personal indwelling of the triune God and of his glorified people” (M Volf, *After Our Likeness: The church as the image of the Trinity*, Sacra Doctrina, Eerdmans, 1998, p 128).

the head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of him that fills all in all.⁵

When we think about church and parachurch ministry, we must begin with this reality of the universal church: “whatever other meanings the word may bear, *this* ... must be its *leading, guiding* meaning—that which must to some extent regulate and modify the rest.”⁶

But this still leaves us with the question of the nature of local churches. How does this glorious and eternal reality relate to First Baptist Church, Albury, or Magnify Church, Lexington? What is the place of the local congregation in God’s purposes?

What is the local church?⁷

The local church is a faithful, formal community of Christians who gather for the purpose of meeting God in his word, praying to him, praising him, building up each other in the faith, building unbelievers into the faith, loving one another, and managing the affairs of the church. The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion (a statement of faith used by the Anglican denomination) describe the local church this way:

The visible Church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men, in the which the pure Word of God is preached, and the Sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ’s ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.⁸

5 The Westminster Confession of Faith, 1647, XXV.1.

6 W Cunningham, *Historical Theology: A review of the principal doctrinal discussions in the Christian church since the Apostolic Age*, vol 1, Banner of Truth Trust, 1969, pp 12-13, emphasis original.

7 An earlier version of this material was published as an article in the newsletter of The Vision 100 Network in September 2018.

8 The Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, XIX, 1562. Note, however, that, in context, article XIX is probably referring to the wider church institution rather than simply a local fellowship; see L Gatiss, ‘A congregation of the faithful’, *Church Society*, 3 September 2019, accessed 6 September 2022 (churchsociety.org/resource/a-congregation-of-the-faithful).

It is important to notice that the local church is a church in the same kind of sense as the universal church: it is *the gathering of God's people around Christ*. The local church is a visible expression of this invisible heavenly reality (see Diagram A).⁹ During his earthly ministry, Christ taught, “For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them” (Matt 18:20). And the apostle Paul describes a solemn gathering of the Corinthian church in these striking terms: “When you are assembled and I am with you in spirit, and the power of our Lord Jesus is present ...” (1 Cor 5:4). What you see and experience in a local church is an imperfect but genuine display of the ultimate spiritual reality of the universal church. So it is mysterious, fearful, profound and wonderful.

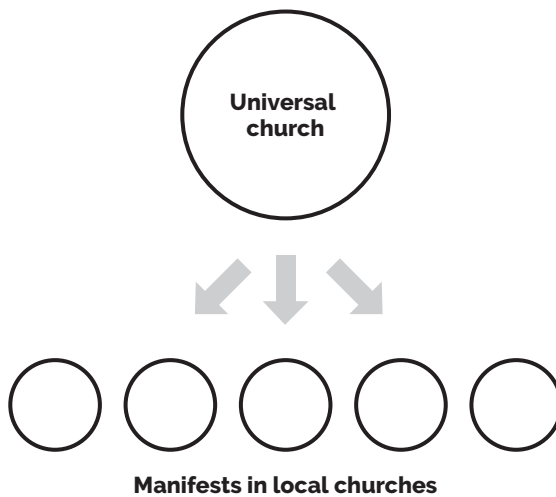


Diagram A: Local/Universal

9 The social distancing restrictions applied by governments to manage the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021 led many churches across the world to start online church services (as well as online small groups and other meetings). This has forced us to be explicit in our reflection about the nature of church, and about whether by 'gathering' we mean 'physical gathering'; see A Heard, M Lynch and L Windsor, 'Is church online church?' [video], *Reach Australia*, YouTube, 18 May 2020, accessed 1 September 2022 (youtube.com/watch?v=JWo7DEhmW4w).

Importantly, Scripture gives no other Christian institution this kind of recognition. Fundamentally and essentially, there are not many churches, but one church of Jesus Christ (Eph 4:4-6); and this one church is then expressed in many local gatherings.¹⁰

A few elements of my definition need to be expanded upon. Firstly, *a true local church is faithful to God's word*. A church that departs from the fundamentals of God's word has forfeited its right to be a true Christian church in any spiritually meaningful sense. This is what is meant by 'the marks of the true church'. These marks, as outlined in The Belgic Confession, are:

The true church can be recognized if it has the following marks: *The church engages in the pure preaching of the gospel; it makes use of the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them; it practices church discipline for correcting faults*. In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God, rejecting all things contrary to it and holding Jesus Christ as the only Head. By these marks one can be assured of recognizing the true church—and no one ought to be separated from it.¹¹

Christ constitutes his church through his Spirit by his word. Where Christ is through his Spirit by his word, there is the church.¹²

10 "These local gatherings, whether at Corinth or in the cities of Galatia, or in Jerusalem, were manifestations of the one church of Christ. Christ had gathered them, and he himself was present according to his promise where two or three were met together in his name. Thus they were gathered round Christ through his Spirit, and consequently nothing was lacking for a complete church of Christ. They were never spoken of as part of Christ's church because they were Christ's church, gathered by him round himself at a certain time in a certain place. They were manifestations of the supernal [heavenly] church of which every member of the local church was at that very time a member" (DB Knox, 'The church and the denominations', *The Briefing*, 1994, 1441-6, pp 3-4, accessed 6 September 2022 [thebriefing.com.au/1994/10/the-church-and-the-denominations]). That said, I don't think it's necessary to go so far as to say that each local church is somehow "the *whole* church" of Christ; cf. Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p 154, emphasis original.

11 The Belgic Confession, XXIX, 1619 [1561], emphasis mine.

12 Volf makes the point that the church is constituted by both the proclamation and the confession of the faith; it is constituted "from below" by the Spirit dwelling in each member, not "from above" by its leadership and their ministry (Volf, *After Our Likeness*, pp 149-152). He argues that the presence of Christ is not somehow "added" to the gathering, but present in each believer (p 156). See also GJ Spykman, *Reformational Theology: A new paradigm for doing dogmatics*, Eerdmans, 1992, pp 452-453.

Secondly, the use of the word *formal* in my definition needs unpacking. This point will become very important when we begin to think about a definition of ‘parachurch’ in chapter 2. By ‘formal’, I mean to say that the church is not just any occasional gathering of Christians that involves prayer and Bible study. A church is a gathering that formally and self-consciously calls itself ‘church’. Gathering around Christ’s word is a *necessary* condition for an assembly to be a Christian church, but it is not a *sufficient* condition. To be a local church, it needs to be ‘formed’, ‘constituted’, ‘instituted’, ‘covenanted’, ‘planted’ or ‘particularized’—whatever your convictions about church government and your preferences of terminology dictate (see Diagram B).

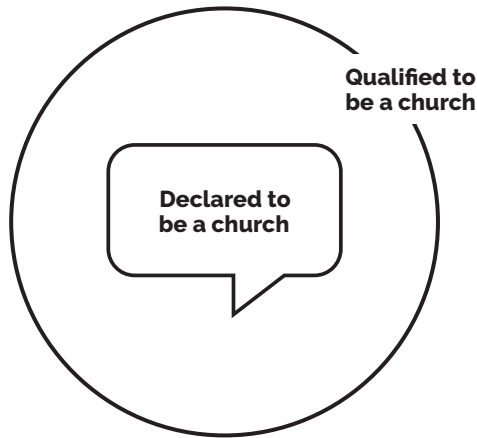


Diagram B: Declared/Qualified

As Donald Robinson writes, “Local churches are not lightly or arbitrarily formed”.¹³ Just as those with sound doctrine, godly lives and the ability to teach—all the necessary qualifications for eldership—still need to be appointed to eldership (1 Tim 4:14,

13 D Robinson, ‘The church in the New Testament’, in *Donald Robinson Selected Works*, vol 1, *Assembling God’s People* (PG Bolt and MD Thompson eds), Australian Church Record, 2008, p 221.

5:22), so too does the local church require formal recognition to be a genuine local church.

Problems arise when we confuse necessary and sufficient conditions to *qualify* with necessary and sufficient conditions to *be*. Just because someone has the gifts and character to qualify as an elder doesn't automatically make them an elder. Being faster than any other person over a hundred-metre stretch might be all that is needed to win a gold medal at the Olympic Games, but this fact doesn't make you a gold medallist; you must compete (according to the rules) in the Games.

So it is with the local church. A local church is a definable entity in the New Testament. For example:

- It has leaders appointed to it (Acts 20:17).
- It has a recognized roll of widows (1 Tim 5:9-16).
- It can “come together” in a way that suggests a recognizable membership (1 Cor 5:4; 11:17-20, 32; 14:26).
- It can expel people from its midst (1 Cor 5:13).¹⁴

All of this demonstrates that local churches have definable boundaries—so we can meaningfully speak of *the church* of Thyatira, or *the church* that meets in the house of Priscilla and Aquila, and so on.

Thirdly, *a local church has continuity in authority, identity and relationships beyond the gathering itself*. This is why I have described the local church as a “formal community of Christians who gather”, rather than “a formal gathering of Christians”.

A view of church that has been immensely influential in Australia and beyond has been called the ‘Knox-Robinson Corrective’, due to its origins in the teaching of Broughton Knox

¹⁴ Even when Jesus says “where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them”, the immediately preceding verses have distinguished “two or three others” who might confront a “brother or sister who sins” from “the church”, to which you ultimately must go: “If they still refuse to listen [to two or three of you], tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (Matt 18:16-17); cf. M Reeves, ‘What is a church? What is a CU?’, *UCCF*, 11 August 2020, p 3, accessed 13 September 2022 (uccf.org.uk/about/cu-and-church); and Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p 137, fn 37.

and Donald Robinson from Moore Theological College.¹⁵ According to Robinson, the New Testament's teaching on the local church focuses fundamentally on an activity rather than an organization. He writes:

The church on earth ... is also *intermittent* and not continuous in character, since its every meeting involves the necessity of dispersal when the time comes ... On earth the church comes and goes, having no abiding city and no temple. Christians never know exactly who they will meet at their next assembly; and no church has any certainty that it will ever meet again. In the midst of life it is in death.

It is not too much to say that the church on earth does not exist or is not visible, except in the actual assembly of believers.¹⁶

Taken on face value, this creates a sharp boundary around the way we think about the local church—a boundary that is difficult to work out in practice.

Do we cease to think of ourselves in relationship to others in our church as soon as the gathering is over? Does the authority of the church's leadership extend over its members beyond their time of gathering together? Doesn't the act of gathering together create a pattern of relationships that endure during the week?

While perhaps a very occasional 'assembly' might have no enduring identity, such an important, purposeful and regular 'assembly' as a Christian church is a different matter. Students don't cease to be a part of the school outside of the classroom. Politicians don't cease to operate as members of parliament out-

15 See Kuhn, *The Ecclesiology of Donald Robinson and D. Broughton Knox*. It must be noted that the views of Donald Robinson and Broughton Knox on the church aren't exactly the same, nor do they remain unchanged over time. Nevertheless, there are sufficient commonalities and stability to be able to speak about the 'Knox-Robinson' view of church.

16 D Robinson, 'The church of God: Its form and unity', in *Donald Robinson Selected Works*, vol 1, p 236, emphasis original.

side of its session. Teams don't cease to identify with their club when they are off the sports field.¹⁷

Thankfully, and to be fair, Knox and Robinson concede this (to some extent):

Concepts of continuance do, of course, exist, in the New Testament, including continuance in the relationship established between Christians by their coming together 'in church', but such continuance is not coextensive with the activity 'the church.'¹⁸

But because of our human nature and the way we do things, [fellowship] forms patterns. It is for this reason that it is possible to speak of elders of a gathering or a church when there is no gathering going on at the moment, as in Acts 20.¹⁹

But throughout their writings, such comments are occasional, compared to an overwhelming emphasis on the local church existing only when gathered, often expressed in absolute terms that don't easily allow for these concessions. In fact, the ongoing reality of the church as community should be more than conceded. Michael Jensen argues along these lines:

[The Knox-Robinson model] is certainly a linguistic analysis of the usage of a particular word in the New Testament texts. Is this sufficient to provide for a proper

17 "I would say a basketball 'team' is still a 'team' even when its members are spending the night in different hotel rooms or cities. And they are a team in the first place, of course, because they consistently come together and do the things which constitute them as a basketball team" (J Leeman, 'Theological critique of multi-site: What exactly is a "church"?', *gMarks*, 30 September 2010, accessed 13 September 2022 [gmarks.org/article/theological-critique-multi-site-what-exactly-church]).

Graham Cole argues that the wider category of the 'people of God' is needed, otherwise the risk is that 'church' exists in a kind of "conceptual isolation" (cited in D Robinson, "The church" revisited: An autobiographical fragment', in *Donald Robinson Selected Works*, vol 1, pp 268-269). Robinson notes Cole's suggestion with approval in a retrospective written later in his ministry. See also Kuhn, *The Ecclesiology of Donald Robinson and D. Broughton Knox*, pp 103-104.

18 Robinson, 'The church of God: Its form and unity', p 234.

19 DB Knox, 'De-mythologizing the church', in *D. Broughton Knox Selected Works*, vol 2, *Church and Ministry* (K Birkett ed), Matthias Media, 2003, p 31.

theological description of the concept of the “church”? ...
What Scripture says about the concept of “church” is
not merely confined to the way it uses the particularly
[sic] word “church.”²⁰

The church is a community of Christians who gather. This is captured by theological descriptions of the local church that speak of it as “the assembly of God’s people—a *society* of Christians”.²¹ A simple example of this might be found in Acts 9:31, which possibly refers to the scattered members of the Jerusalem church as “the church”.²² This way of thinking about the community and gathering of God’s people is also seen in the different words used in the Old Testament to describe the community of Israel. One of these words, the Hebrew word *edah*, “seems to refer to the congregation of Israel, whether assembled or not”. This word is almost always translated by the Septuagint Greek Old Testament with the word ‘synagogue’, and is often translated as ‘community’ in our English translations (see, for example, Exodus 16).²³ The activity of gathering is

20 Cited in Kuhn, *The Ecclesiology of Donald Robinson and D. Broughton Knox*, pp 104-105, emphasis original. Kuhn admits that Robinson did not fully integrate his findings with broader systematic theology, but questions whether this would overturn his claims (p 105). Jensen’s point is that the biblical description of local church implies, or even requires, a continuity of relationship and identity for these communities. See also GR Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology, Crossway, 2012, pp 313-314, fn 47.

21 T Witherow, *The Apostolic Church: Which Is It?*, Free Presbyterian Publications, 1997 [1856], p 13, emphasis mine. See also Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, vol 1, p 12; and Volf, *After Our Likeness*, p 137.

22 Robinson says that this is “still the Jerusalem church, attenuated or dispersed through persecution” (Robinson, ‘The church in the New Testament’, pp 216-217). But this explanation undermines his insistence that ‘church’ must refer to a gathered assembly.

23 RL Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, Thomas Nelson, 1998, pp 806-807. On the distinction and relationship between *edah* and the Hebrew word more commonly used for the Israelites gathered in an assembly (*qahal*), see Kuhn, *The Ecclesiology of Donald Robinson and D. Broughton Knox*, pp 100-105. Both Hebrew words are even found together in the expression “the whole assembly of the congregation” (ESV) or “all the members of the community of Israel” (NIV; Exod 12:6; Num 14:5). Knox and Robinson draw on a biblical theology of gathering across the Bible as background to the New Testament usage of the word ‘church’: to be saved is to be ‘gathered’, while to be ‘scattered’ is to come under judgement. This background actually further enriches our appreciation of the reality that ‘church’ carries with it a broader concept of ‘community’. For Israel remained ‘gathered’ (as opposed to ‘scattered’) in the promised land, in a sense, even when they were not assembling in a local synagogue or at the temple in Jerusalem.

essential to the local church, but its life and character need not be restricted to the time of gathering. Even when we are not actually gathered together, we continue to think of ourselves and live together as ‘the people who gather’.

Fourthly, *caught up in this definition of what the church does are other related activities* such as baptism, the Lord’s Supper, church discipline, ordaining leaders, and collecting money for use in God’s work and good deeds. All these things are implied in the definition but need to be drawn out. The Lord’s Supper and baptism are sometimes described as ‘the sacraments’ and are spoken of separately from ‘the ministry of the word’. But they can also be seen as a particular kind of ‘meeting God in his word’: they are ‘visible words’.²⁴ Church discipline is really a sad, negative consequence of our duty to build each other up through correcting and rebuking. Ordaining leaders and collecting money are just two examples of the kinds of things churches do when they gather that are part of “managing the affairs of the church”, which go on to facilitate further meeting with God, building each other up, and loving one another.

Fifthly, *a mature local church has its own formally recognized leadership*. Christ gives the gifts of leaders to his church so that the church may be built up (Eph 4:7-13). These leaders are called various things in the New Testament, including elders, overseers, ministers, teachers and pastors. Another group are called deacons (e.g. 1 Tim 3:8-10). None of these leaders are necessary for the formation of a local church, for we are told that it was well after the churches in Lystra, Iconium and Antioch were planted that Paul and Barnabas returned and “appointed elders for them in each church” (Acts 14:23). A church is a church

24 “Augustine calls a sacrament *a visible word* (August. in Joann. Hom. 89), because it represents the promises of God as in a picture, and places them in our view in a graphic bodily form (August. cont. Faust. Lib. 19)” (J Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [H Beveridge trans], IV.14.6, 1845, emphasis original, accessed 15 September 2022 [ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes]).

before it has its own human leaders.²⁵ After all, Christ is as much the head of any local church as he is of the universal church, and he rules it by his Spirit through his word. The apostle John can even provocatively declare:

As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him. (1 John 2:27)

Even though a local church does not need its own local leadership to be a true church, it has not reached the mature state God intends for it until it has appointed its own leaders. Paul writes to Titus: “The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you” (Titus 1:5). It would be a stubborn and foolish thing for a church to resolve, like Peter Pan, to never grow up in this way. It would be a disappointing and possibly shameful thing for all its suitably qualified members to continually shirk the privilege and responsibility of formal leadership.

Sixthly, *not everyone in a local church is truly a Christian, and not every genuine Christian is a member of a local church.* The church on earth is a mixed assembly: those who are truly born again, and so are members of the universal, heavenly assembly; those who profess to be Christians, but are not truly born again; children of Christians, who may not have a formed faith of their own; and those who don’t claim to be Christian, but who attend for any number of other reasons. Moreover, in the messiness of lived experience, there are genuine Christians who may not always be active members of any local church, or who may be members of churches that are not truly faithful churches at all

²⁵ Depending on what you think about the connection between congregations, it could be argued that when a church doesn’t have its own particular local leadership, it still has the leadership and oversight of the wider network of churches of which it is a part. We’ll discuss this more in chapter 3.

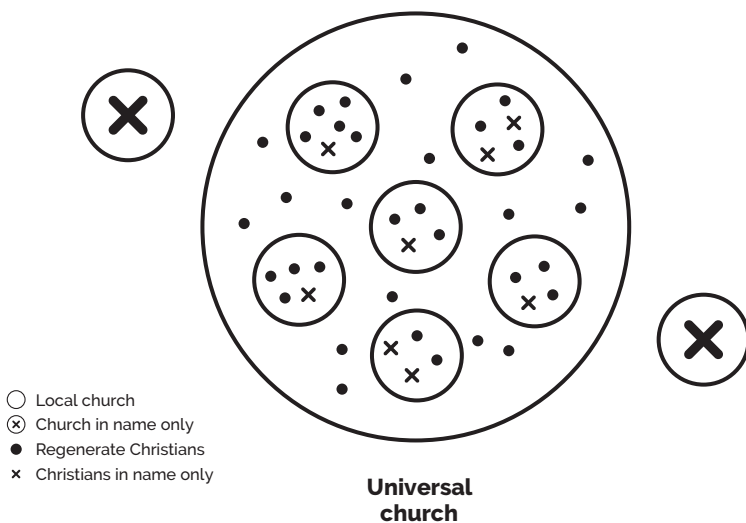


Diagram C: Invisible/Visible

(see Diagram C).²⁶ These are not ideals to be celebrated, but realities to be recognized. This is the mixed nature of the visible church in this present age.

Finally, *a local church is not simply a means to an end*. It would be easy to read my definition and see the local church as a very functional thing: a body that meets to satisfy certain purposes, and then, once the desired outcomes are attained, simply adjourns its meeting. But this misses the fact that the gathering of the local church is a good thing in itself.

God's purpose is to gather his people to himself and to dwell among us. This purpose can be traced across the whole Bible. God gathers Israel to himself at Sinai and then brings the nation into the promised land, where he intends for them to regularly gather at the temple for the great feasts. Later, his judgement on their godlessness was to scatter them to the

²⁶ This is one of the important points that the concept of 'invisible church' is seeking to make: the true church is never fully contained by the institutional church; see Westminster Confession, XXV.1-2 and 4-5. As Augustine said, "there are many sheep outside and many wolves inside" (cited in H Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics* [J Bolt ed], abridged edn, Baker Academic, 2011, pp 593, 600-601). Although see warnings about the dangers of the invisible/visible distinction in Spykman, *Reformational Theology*, pp 438-439.

nations through the conquests of Assyria and Babylon, by which process they become “not a people”.²⁷ And yet, the prophetic hope was that he would one day come and gather them to himself once more, in a kind of new exodus.

This final ‘gathering’ is what Jesus is bringing about as he builds his church. When God’s saved and glorified people meet together in loving fellowship, with God in their midst, God’s purposes reach their fulfilment. So there is something wonderful about the very fact of gathering. These purposes of meeting God, building each other up, and loving each other are not mere ‘SMART Goals’ for which we assemble out of mere pragmatic efficiency.²⁸ They are the fulfilment of the very things that God saved us to be: people who love the Lord our God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength and love our neighbours as ourselves.²⁹ As John Stott writes:

We are not only Christian people; we are also church people. We are not only committed to Christ, we are also committed to the body of Christ. At least I hope so. I trust that none of my readers is that grotesque anomaly, an un-churched Christian. The New Testament knows nothing of such a person. For the church lies at the very centre of the eternal purpose of God. It is not a divine afterthought. It is not an accident of history. On

27 1 Peter 2:10; cf. Hosea 2:23.

28 ‘SMART’ is a management acronym which stands for ‘Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-framed Goals’.

29 However, I don’t agree with Donald Robinson and Broughton Knox that since the church is the end goal of God’s mission, the church itself therefore cannot have a mission of its own—in other words, that mission is the activity of *Christians* but not of *the church*; see DB Knox, ‘Heaven is people’ in *D. Broughton Knox Selected Works*, vol 2, p 248; and Robinson, ‘The church of God: Its form and unity’, p 242. The end goal of the church is a dynamic, not a static, reality. We manifest our being both as we enjoy loving fellowship with God and one another, and as we serve his purposes in the world. As those entrusted with God’s word in the world (1 Tim 3:15; 1 Pet 2:4-10), local churches—not merely individual Christians—are responsible for the proclamation of that word. See MD Thompson, ‘Does the local church have a mission?’, in *Exploring the Missionary Church* (BG Webb ed), Explorations 7, Anzea Publishers, 1993, pp 1-25; and DA Williams, *Relocating Holism: A theology of care for the poor in conversation with Sydney Anglicanism* [dissertation], Fuller Theological Seminary, 2017. Removing evangelistic mission from the responsibilities of the church leaves this vital work without the oversight of any biblical institution.

the contrary, the church is God's new community. For his purpose, conceived in a past eternity, being worked out in history, and to be perfected in a future eternity, is not just to save isolated individuals and so perpetuate our loneliness, but rather to build his church, that is, to call out of the world a people for his own glory.³⁰

The importance of gathering

I want to take a moment to pause to reflect positively on the fact that the local church is a community of Christians *who gather*. This will be important in some of the chapters that follow, especially chapter 3 (on denominations) and chapter 12 (on mega-churches and multi-site churches). As we have already seen, the local church manifests the ultimate reality that Christ has gathered his people to himself by his work of salvation. So the act of gathering is not merely a matter of practicality or tradition; it is in itself a significant spiritual act. We are the church of God and we express that by gathering on earth as the church of God. While there are all sorts of exceptions due to health and special needs, work, living arrangements and unusual circumstances, the normal and regular pattern of the Christian life involves the church community gathering weekly and then scattering to serve God throughout the week, still connected with one another as the community which gathers, and gathering in all sorts of smaller groups in between.

The weekly gathering of God's people with their local church is a vital part of the normal way that God's people worship God, grow in their faith and minister to one another. These gatherings also become powerful ways in which unbelievers can not only hear the gospel but also see it at work in the life of the

30 J Stott, *Living Church: Convictions of a lifelong pastor*, IVP, Downers Grove, 2011, pp 19-20. See also the critique of "secularizing the church ... as a voluntary society" in DW Taylor, *Like a Mighty Army? The Salvation Army, the church, and the churches*, Pickwick Publications, 2014, pp 133-134.

church community. The New Testament also teaches at several points that there is an authority properly entrusted to the local church community as a gathered entity. For example, the stern responsibility of church discipline involves a declaration by the church as a gathered congregation (Matt 18:17-18; 1 Cor 5:4-5).

The social-distancing restrictions imposed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have forced Christians to think about these things on a large scale. The power of modern livestreaming and video conferencing technology has meant that Christians could still connect with one another even when unable to meet in person. How are we to think about these online events? Are they not church at all? A poor substitute for the real thing? Or just as much church as a pre-COVID, in-person gathering? Is it appropriate to celebrate the Lord's Supper over Zoom? Is it a good idea to continue offering livestreaming as a normal way to participate in church? These were questions that some churches had already considered as they adopted livestreaming 'online church' or multi-site congregations primarily using a large amount of video content. But they suddenly became questions that almost every church had to think about.

I have weighed into these discussions on various occasions, arguing that the kind of gathering assumed and expected in the Scriptures is *physical* gathering, while realizing that online meetings are "kind of church", but in a sub-optimal way.³¹ Our embodied existence matters: we are saved by an incarnate, resurrected Saviour and called to a glorified resurrection hope, and we live out that salvation in our bodies in this age. In the light of these discussions, the definition of the local church provided above could be clarified by saying that "the local church is a community of Christians who gather *physically*". There is great potential to use video conferencing technology to make some kind of fellowship possible for those who would otherwise

31 Heard, Lynch and Windsor, 'Is church online church?'; and M Lynch, *The Knox-Robinson View of Church and Livestreaming* (audio file), University Fellowship of Christians website, 24 March 2020, accessed 23 March 2022 (ufcutas.org/content/knox-robinson-view-church-and-livestreaming-%E2%80%94-episode-1).

struggle to attend church meetings in person, but it is not fitting to build the whole pattern of church life around physical gathering being an optional extra.

The centrality of the church

The church is enormously important to God's purposes in salvation history. No other Christian institution is given such importance in God's word. Ephesians 1 tells us that Christ rules all things with an interest in the wellbeing and glory of the church: he rose from the dead and ascended "far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come"; and this resurrection and ascension to rule as the "head over everything" was "for the church" (1:21-22). That is how important the church is to Christ's purposes in the universe. The church is the focal point of a larger work of God "to be put into effect when the times reach their fulfilment—to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ" (v 10).³² The church is so identified with Christ and his work that it is called "his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (v 23).

God gathers the church not only for our good, but also for his glory. The repeated idea in Ephesians 1 is that we are blessed "to the praise of his glory" (v 14; cf. vv 6, 12). Chapter 2 tells us we are saved together with Christ "in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace" (v 7). Paul presents a similar idea in chapter 3: "His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, according to his eternal purpose that he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vv 10-11).

32 The Greek word translated here "bring unity" includes the word translated "head" elsewhere in Ephesians. So the NIV 1984 translation: "to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ."

The universal church, manifested on earth in local churches, is of great importance in God's purposes. When we see the church in the light of God's work, we see more than an imperfect institution or an awkward fellowship. The church is, as CS Lewis has his fictional devil Screwtape describe it, "spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners ... a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy".³³



Where, then, does the church end and other Christian activity begin? Is there such a thing as a Christian ministry that is *not* church, and, if so, how should we think about such ministries? This is where we turn in chapter 2.

³³ CS Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters with Screwtape Prepares a Toast*, Harper Collins, 2002, p 5.

