

## CHURCH OVERVIEW

Anyone should feel presumptuous writing on this awesome and controversial subject. Any introduction should point to basic ways to understand the importance, definition, biblical descriptions, and historical highlights of what we call the Church.

By common dictionary definitions, church refers to (1) a building, (2) a congregation or parish, (3) a branch of the Christian religion, and (4) the collective body of all Christians. Four definitions controversial in themselves.

Most Christians and churches teach that one cannot be a Christian on his/her own. Judaism and Christianity (along with other religions) see faith as being part of a faith-community, as being a part of God's people worshiping and acting together in the world. The church is where people are baptized and receive Communion. It is where most Christians get married and finally buried. It's meant to be an important source and support of our spiritual life.

Jewish Scripture sees the faith community as God's people (2 Chronicles 6: 24-25; 7: 14 and throughout the Prophets). That same idea carried over into the Christian New Testament (1 Peter 2: 9-10). Israel is called God's (loving or unfaithful) wife (Isaiah 54: 5ff, Hosea, etc). In the New Testament, the Church is seen as the Bride of Christ (Ephesians 5: 25-27, 32). The Church is also described as the family of God (Ephesians 2: 14-18) and as the Body of Christ on earth (1 Corinthians 12: 1-26). Finally, the Church is called a holy temple (Ephesians 2: 19-20).

When we criticize the Church (or a church), it is good to have these biblical images in mind: God's People, God's Family, God's Temple, Christ's Body, Christ's Bride. These are awesome pictures of what God intends for us.

Most agree that the Church is meant to worship God first of all. The Church is also expected to receive God's Word and teaching, to evangelize, to provide a special fellowship among its members, and to serve its own and the world. It is helpful to keep these five functions in mind.

Just before his death (in the Gospel of John, ch. 17), Jesus Christ prayed for his followers who would establish the Church. He prayed especially for the unity of that Church, then for its truthfulness (or orthodoxy), and then that it might be protected from worldly adversity.

No one can deny that the Church historically includes great heroes (St. Francis of Assisi and Mother Theresa of Calcutta, among many others), and that it also includes real atrocities (the Crusades against Muslims and Jews. the labeling Jews as Christ-killers, moral indiscretions among leaders and child sexual abuse). So, our eyes and minds must be open, both to divine possibilities and human distortions, as we study the Church.

The first church in Jerusalem is described (in Acts 2: 41-42) as receiving those who were baptized and devoting itself to (1) the apostles' teaching, (2) fellowship, (3) breaking of bread or the Eucharist, and (4) the prayers. These early Christians were dispersed by persecution. The apostles and others also went out as missionaries or evangelists establishing churches along their route. In the second century, bishops were established in these cities assisted by elders and deacons. Just as the New Testament writers Paul, Peter and John confronted false beliefs in their letters or epistles, the Church continued to fight heresies in the next few centuries.

Early worship was a combination of Synagogue practice (reading of Scripture and prayers) and the liturgy of the Last Supper (taken from the Seder or Passover and called by early Christians, the “breaking of bread”). By the second century, the “breaking of bread” was usually called the Eucharist. Earliest worship was what we would today call “charismatic,” with spontaneous prayers and prophecies interrupting or complementing traditional liturgical practices. Gradually, churches settled into a more formal liturgy.

For many centuries there was one Catholic and Orthodox Church—outside of which persisted many divergent beliefs and practices such as Arianism, Montanism and Gnosticism. Church Councils struggled to determine an orthodox theology and condemned heresies. The Nicene Creed, the Apostles Creed and others are a result of those Councils.

In 1054 differences and feelings between the Roman Catholic Church based in Rome and the Eastern Orthodox Church grew so strong as to create the Great Schism. In the 16th century Protestants broke away from Western Roman Catholicism. That, briefly, is how Christianity became divided and why we have so many churches. Many differences are not at all trivial, and it is understandable, though deeply regrettable, that people need different kinds of churches.

The 20th century saw the great Pentecostal revival, a movement that not only spawned Pentecostal churches but also influenced most other Western churches in one way or another. The Liturgical Renewal Movement was another important 20th century movement affecting especially the Roman Catholic Church(Vatican II), the Anglican/Episcopal, the Lutheran, Methodist churches and others as studies of ancient worship produced new liturgies and prayer books and brought the styles of many liturgical churches closer together.

Several fascinating developments in church life can be described under this topic. The House Church, Multi-cultural Church, Urban Church, Black Church, various Ethnic Churches, Mega-church, Seeker-friendly churches, the Emerging Church, the Liturgical Churches, the Liberation Church, are all worthy of investigation. The musical styles of these churches, and generational preferences are special matters for study and discourse. One topic putting special pressure on some denominations is that of homosexual unions. Mergers, splits, ecumenical trends, concern for social justice, and the influence of church in politics, are also controversial issues needing to be discussed.

#### QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. What is your relationship to a church? What are your feelings about Church?
2. What are your main questions about the Church? How could they best be discussed?
3. Was this article helpful in pointing to some of your questions or concerns about the Church? Why or why not?
4. Do you think a person’s faith and spirituality can thrive without connection to a church? If so, what alternative do you see to the Church?
5. What suggestion(s) would you give churches today?

#### IMPLICATIONS

1. The Church and churches are important social phenomena that even the un-churched must take into account in discussions of our social and civic life.
2. Many Christians are very uncertain about their denominational commitment. Some aren't satisfied with this uncertainty but don't know how to work it out.
3. This article in itself should be a good discussion starter or outline. What follows under this topic should help those looking for new ideas and some answers.

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