

What is church?

The early church, as described in Acts and the Apostle's letters, did not have the things that we think describes a church today.

- They had no grand, ornate church buildings and cathedrals, no choirs or worship bands.
- They did not have the bible as we know it, with an Old and New Testament.
- They had no creeds to summarise their beliefs,
- No orders of service books or patterns for worship.

All that came over time as Christians creatively developed ways to show and glorify God.

So, what did the early church have?

They had a strong sense of community – identifying as people of the way, Christians as they soon became known, and they were working out how to be communities of Christ.

The over-riding motivation for them was love for God, celebrating how he had given them a new spiritual birth, and a love for each other which was a prime command given by Jesus; partly because they still had disagreements and misunderstandings and Jesus knew they would have.

'Church' is a collective grouping of people called by God, to carry his name and vision in the world.

How was the Church described?

Just listen to some of the opening comments (I've merged them together) from apostles' letters to the various churches of their day:

- ✓ To all loved by God and called to be his holy people, grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.
- ✓ First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you because your faith is being reported all over the world.
- ✓ To all his holy people, praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort. who gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age.
- ✓ I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel ... being confident ... that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion.
- ✓ Your faith is growing more and more, and the love all have you have for one another is increasing.
- ✓ In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.

Being the Bride of Christ

The Apostles, when still disciples, were described by Jesus as 'guests of the bridegroom' (Matt.9:15). One of those describes that 'the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride

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shall be made ready', (Rev.19:7), while Paul gives marriage instructions to the Ephesians, comparing this with the church as Christ's bride.

Perhaps you've been at a wedding to hear the famous words, 'Love is patient, love is kind'? This is from Paul's letter to the church in Corinth. The whole chapter of 1Corinthians 13 is often read. So, let's use this bridal picture to identify the Church.

Unless the Lord builds the house, its builders labour in vain. (Ps.127:1)

So far, so good! An example of vows the bride makes, inserting 'church' as the bride:

Before God, and in the presence of this congregation, I, 'church', take you, 'Christ' to be my wedded husband.

1: Before God and in the presence of this congregation ... This is a holy, personal and public commitment.

2: I 'church' take you 'Christ' ... this formalises the relationship as the church accepting Christ's invitation and making him the love of its life. Prior to the vow the minister may have used a phrase such as, 'forsaking all others.'

This is an area that the apostles offered encouragement and correction to the church, for it is a covenant of love, from which duty comes. The Church as bride shows its covenant of love through love for Christ, above all else.

Becoming the Bride of Christ, the Church is called to be a godly people in a covenant of love, showing love in the same way that Christ showed love to others.

Sometimes the church has got this the wrong way around, turning Christ's invitation to be his bride into only being a legal contract that focusses on the duty of law. This is a common human reaction and it even happened in the early church!

Jesus corrected the church in Ephesus with these words,

'Yet I hold this against you: you have forsaken the love you had at first. Consider how far you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first.' (Rev.2:4-5)

Ever been hurt by a 'legal church'? On behalf of the Church, we are sorry to have hurt you. Please forgive the human desire to legalise and judge and please try again if you've given up on being in the Bridal Community.

Mmm, whether in the church or outside and holding a grudge against it, this is hard isn't it! For this also means each of us has to lay down our judgement of the Church. The next part of the vows describes this a bit more ...

I give myself to you as your wife for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, until we are parted by death, and to this end I give you my word.

3: ... First, is that no matter what, the faithful promise is 'I am with you'. Second, is the implication of shared resource. Some vows include the words, '**all that I have I give to you and all that I have I share with you**'.

Perhaps one of the most dramatic signs of Christ's church, after the various miracles and wonders being performed is the Acts 2 description. Members with surplus sold property and possessions to give to anyone in need, ensuring that none of their community were in poverty and at least they had what they needed.

A challenge here is to realise that we are caretakers of what we have because they are blessings from the Father. Today's church is also called to share, both financially and in talents. We must learn to hold lightly what we have and to show our love by sharing with the church.

4: Until we are parted by death? ... great joy on this one, for **Jesus' covenant is greater and in him there is no death, no parting**. Some great motivation to live in this covenant right there!

Jesus speaking to the churches said such things as,

- ✓ To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.
- ✓ The one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death.
- ✓ The one who is victorious will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot out the name of that person from the book of life but will acknowledge that name before my Father and his angels.
- ✓ To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne.

To the Bride...

What do we notice? The Church's heart is to be set on God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, to love him and follow him. Members are called to support and encourage one another in this covenant of love.

Were Jesus to write to you now, saying he knows you,

- **what praise would he give you about your heart and good deeds?**
- **what corrections would he ask you to make?**

A prayerful instruction over you: Based on Colossians 3.12–14

- ✓ As God's own, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness and patience.
- ✓ Bear with one another and forgive one another as the Lord has forgiven you.
- ✓ Crown all these things with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.