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## Chapter 1

# A Divine Idea: God's Plan and Purpose for the Church

*The Church's one foundation  
Is Jesus Christ her Lord;  
She is His new creation  
By water and the Word:  
From heav'n He came and sought her  
To be His holy Bride;  
With His own blood He bought her,  
And for her life He died.*

'The Church's One Foundation'  
S. J. Stone, 1866

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Growing up with Christian parents who regularly participated in church services and activities, I lived under the false assumption that others held the same idea of 'church' as I did. But at eighteen, I headed off to a Christian college and realized my error. Following our first week of classes, my new dorm-mates and I began discussing which church we should attend on Sunday. Some questioned whether or not we needed to attend church at all. 'I can have my

quiet time in the morning and we have the evening prayer service on campus Sunday nights. That's really all I need.' Though I didn't agree, I also didn't have a biblical or thoughtful response. Years later the fruit of each of their various decisions was evident in their lives.

After my husband and I married we lived together in six different states, all with their own cultural concepts around 'church.' On one of those moves, we found ourselves immersed in a culturally Christian environment. Most of my coworkers identified as believers in the Lord Jesus, but many were either disconnected or, at best, loosely connected with any church in the area. Still clinging to what seemed like some cultural kudos for claiming Christianity, they were happy to accept the Christian label without identifying with any particular church. The conversations were different from those in college, but the underlying issues were the same.

These illustrations show just some of the confusion around the idea of 'church.' Right now I find myself writing in my home in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic. Churches around the world have been unable to gather together for months now. These new restrictions have left many asking themselves, What is church? Can't we just 'do church' online? Maybe we just have church at home with our immediate family? This pandemic has highlighted some of the confusion that already exists about the church.

### *God's Idea*

So let's ask that question! What is 'church?' What is the point of 'going to church?' Why should I bother being a part of one today? We'll be addressing these questions in part one of this book. In answering, we'd be remiss not to look to God's Word for the answers, for it's there that we learn that *the church has been God's idea all along.*

The church is actually where we look to see what God is, and has been, doing in the world. It's even been referred to as 'a colony of

heaven.’<sup>1</sup> This means the doctrine of the church, formally referred to as *ecclesiology*, isn’t just for the professionals with seminary degrees. The doctrine of the church is for everyone! Yet theologian Ligon Duncan has sadly noted, ‘Ecclesiology is indisputably one of evangelicalism’s great weaknesses, in part because of subjectivism, individualism, and pragmatism.’<sup>2</sup> Today’s worldviews permeate much of our thinking, shouting (or sometimes quietly whispering): ‘There is no absolute truth;’ ‘Every person has their own truth;’ ‘Nothing good comes from spending your time at church;’ ‘Churches are all corrupt.’ Much more time, effort, money, energy, and study have been put into finding the ‘secret sauce’ to make a church ‘work’ than in looking at what God’s Word tells us about His creation, His divine idea, the church. It’s imperative as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ that we better know and understand the picture, gift, and responsibility He has given us in and through His church. How else will you be able to answer the question, ‘Why do you go to church?’? Do you know why?

If the church is God’s idea, then He has a plan for it and a purpose. To help us identify this, we will walk through the timeline of biblical history, looking at this reality manifested on the pages of Scripture. We’ll also see how that plan involves a universal and local church as well as an invisible and visible church. We will close by looking at God’s purpose for the church, noting how it was created to both protect and promote the gospel. The church is God’s idea and it’s been part of His plan for all of history all along. Let’s begin right there, shall we?

### *God’s Plan: God’s glory through a people*

From the beginning of time the church has been God’s idea to bring Himself glory and praise. He has been about making a people for Himself. He declared in Isaiah they are, ‘my chosen people,

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1 Clowney, Edmund, *The Church*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1995) p.72

2 Duncan, Ligon, Opening endorsements for Mark Dever, *The Church*.

the people whom I formed for myself that they might declare my praise,' (Isa. 43:21). God's eternal plan has always been to display His glory not just through individual people but through a corporate body. The church is not a man-made concept or social structure. It isn't some kind of therapy group for weak people. It's not a club or cultural norm for society. The church is God displaying His glory through a people. The church is, and always has been, God's plan for the revelation of His glory and name. But how can I say that? Where in Scripture do we actually see this idea of the church being God's plan? Keep reading!

The church is the collection of God's chosen people, called by His grace, through faith in Christ and set apart to glorify Him together in the world.<sup>3</sup> The church is a gathered people, it isn't a thing. Sure, a church usually meets in a building, but the building is not what God means when He refers to His body. His body is His chosen people, a people for Himself (1 Pet. 2:9-10). When we talk about the church we aren't fundamentally referencing where they meet, rather, we are referring to the gathering of God's people. It's helpful to think about the church not primarily as a *what*, but a *who*. It's a living organism. So when we ask the question, 'What is the church?' what we should really be asking is, 'Who is the church?'

To help us better understand where we see this in Scripture, let's briefly walk through what the theologians call the *redemptive storyline of the Bible*. This is the story of God's plan for history as displayed to the world. The story of how He has saved a people for Himself through the blood of His own Son. Here we can see firsthand how the church has been His idea since the beginning and continues even today.

### OLD TESTAMENT PEOPLE OF GOD

The story starts in the Old Testament and continues to unfold beautifully as we walk through the entirety of the Old Testament

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3 Ephesians 2:8-9, 19-22, 3:10, 21

and into the New Testament where Jesus visibly comes onto the scene. It began in the garden in Genesis 1 when God created humanity in His image. In Genesis 2:19 God gave Adam the charge of naming every living creature and in 2:23 he even named ‘woman,’ the complementary image bearer given to him by God. After the fall in the Garden of Eden we read Adam named her more specifically, ‘Eve’ (Gen. 3:20). Adam and Eve weren’t created solely for one another. They were created by God and for God, but the wicked deceiver slithered his way onto the scene and sin entered the world, causing that fellowship to be broken. This problem of separation from God because of sin would plague humanity for thousands of years. And the question looms, ‘How will fellowship ever be restored?’

Because of their sin, Adam and Eve were expelled from paradise and learned to live in a fallen world outside the garden. God gave them children, establishing them as a family unit. And as we continue to move through redemptive history in the Old Testament, we see God putting people and families into a larger ‘family.’ Noah and his wife, his sons and their wives were placed by God in the ark and saved from the flood (Gen. 8:13-19). God then established a covenant to protect them as His people (Gen. 9:1-16). Abraham was also brought into a covenant with God, and God promised to make him a father of a great nation (Gen. 17:5-6). God ‘chose’ him to lead this group of people (Gen. 18:19). We know this great nation as the people of Israel (Gen. 32:28). Throughout the rest of the Old Testament we come across the phrase, ‘my people’<sup>4</sup> repeatedly.

God demonstrated His authority through the naming of His people. Whether or not you have had to name a pet or maybe a child, we can all understand the importance of a name. Naming our first child felt like a rite of passage into parenthood. But why is a name so important? It shows the authority of the one doing

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4 Exodus 5:1, 6:7, 2 Chronicles 7:14, Jeremiah 30:22, Amos 9:14

the naming, but it also does something else. Naming gives identity. A 'what' becomes a 'who.' No longer 'baby,' but 'Amy.' No longer 'doggie,' but 'Wallace.' So too when God set His love on His people, He designated them 'my people,' thus declaring they are not just any people, but *His* people. It's the repeated phrase Moses says to Pharaoh, 'Let **my** people go, so they may worship me.'<sup>5</sup> His people were set apart to worship Him, but they could not because they were enslaved. They needed a redeemer. God used Moses to be that redeemer for His people in Egypt, leading them out into the wilderness towards the promised land.

The people of God were a nation among the nations, but they were not to live like the nations. They were set apart and expected to keep God's laws, living together in such a way that the character of God was on display through their life together. The laws they kept separated them and marked them out as God's possession. They were to be distinct. That was their job. God had chosen them and set them apart to represent Himself to the world. On Mt. Sinai in Exodus 24, God established a covenant with His people simply because they were *His* people. The covenant was a promise from God to them, sealed by blood, declaring them as His own, and His people vowed they too would keep the covenant and be His people.

Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people. And they said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.' And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people, and said, 'Behold, the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.' (Exod. 24:7-8)

But herein lies the problem. They couldn't do it. Just as Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, so the people of God sinned and rebelled against their Creator, breaking their promise to obey all that the Lord had spoken for them to do. The sin that so easily entangled

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5 Exodus 7:16, 8:1, 8:20, 9:1, 9:13, 10:3, emphasis mine

them could never be fully paid for by their puny sacrifices. They couldn't keep all the words of the Lord as they promised they would. Their sins would require a sacrifice. And yet the bloody sacrifices of bulls and lambs were only temporary fixes. The outlook was bleak for the nation of Israel. But God. He had a plan for His people. He promised them that a Messiah, a Savior, a Redeemer,<sup>6</sup> would come to rescue them fully and finally, forever sealing them to Himself as His special people.

### NEW TESTAMENT PEOPLE OF GOD

I find some of the greatest books are the ones with a plot twist so tight it leaves you scratching your head and saying, 'What a minute. How could I have missed all that? I need to read it all over again!' We think we have all the information until our view is expanded and a fuller picture is painted for us to see the whole landscape. Our initial vantage point seems pretty straight forward, until the lens is widened on the horizon of the storyline. Ian McEwan's novel, *Atonement* made me gasp at the end. Learning about Mr. Rochester's past in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* brought so many pieces of the plot together. The classic movie plot twist of *Sixth Sense* is still one of the best of all time. It's not that I didn't understand what was happening all along in these stories. I just didn't have the *whole* story. Like trying to interpret a puzzle only half assembled, it's not until every piece is put into place that the entire picture can be seen. When we read the New Testament and the Old Testament together, we widen our theological lenses and better understand God's plan for history and who are His chosen people.

After 400 very silent years of history, the New Testament opens up with a boom, declaring that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the Christ that had been prophesied to come to 'save his people from their sins' (Matt. 1:1,16, 21-23). In a time when Jewish lineages only contained the names of men, Matthew has

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6 Isaiah 9, 53

the audacity to proclaim the names of women in Jesus' genealogy.<sup>7</sup> Not only are women included, but these were Gentile women who were seen as sexually scandalous. Jesus, the Son of David, the Son of Abraham, the long-awaited King was being connected to sinfulness and scandal. What was happening here? Was Matthew going for a shock effect?

Matthew is simply widening the camera lens for us to see more of the whole redemptive plan set in place at the very beginning, a plan that included a broader swath of people than just the Israelites. There had been whispers in the Old Testament stories that 'not all who descended from Israel belong to Israel' (Rom. 9:6). We read about Gentiles who were brought in among them (Josh. 6:25, Ruth 4:13-21). Women like Rahab and Ruth had become part of God's people. But right here in Matthew chapter 1, the genealogy loudly declares His people are no longer distinguished as ethnically uniform, but now as ethnically diverse,<sup>8</sup> all according to God's original plan to draw people from every tongue, tribe, and nation (Gen. 12:1-3, Rev. 7:9, 14:6).

The New Testament unpacks God's plan for the nations and His church. We watch Jesus upend the understood norm of Jewish centrality among God's elect. Jesus regularly heals, spiritually and physically, those 'outside the camp,' the Gentiles. Mark 7:24-30 where Jesus exorcises a demon from the daughter of a persistent Syrophenician woman and then commends her for her faith highlights this very thing. Paul understood this and states it clearly in Romans 1:16 saying, 'For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.'

Under the old covenant the people of God gathered as an assembly of ethnically Jewish people to worship Him together. But God established a new covenant. Through the life and sacrificial

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7 Matthew 1:3, 5-6

8 See also Galatians 3:28; 2:11-21; Colossians 3:11; Revelation 5:9

death of His Son, Jesus, He fulfilled the covenantal promises made with His people in the Old Testament and ushered in the new covenant that would include all peoples. Jesus lived the perfect life we could not live and died the death we deserve as sinners. This marked a unique shift in history for all time.

Hebrews 9:15 reads, ‘Therefore, he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.’ The people of God are no longer set apart ethnically, but spiritually, as those in-dwelt by the Holy Spirit. The new covenant isn’t entered into biologically, but supernaturally, through the regenerating work of the Spirit. So where the old covenant was ethnically pure but more spiritually mixed, the new covenant is ethnically mixed and yet spiritually pure.

When John the Baptist prophesied about Jesus, the coming Messiah, he described His power, but also His purpose – that the Holy Spirit would one day indwell His people. ‘I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire’ (Matt. 3:11). John prophesied the indwelling that would come on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on His people, the church. Like the birth of Jesus, it was a one-time event with eternal ramifications.

It’s this ushering in of the Holy Spirit into the hearts of these believers that marks the ‘birthday’ of the church. G. E. Ladd helpfully unpacks this idea stating, ‘The Church properly speaking had its birthday on the day of Pentecost, for the church is composed of all of those who, by one Spirit, have been baptized into one body (1 Cor. 12:13), and this baptizing work of the Spirit began on the day of Pentecost.’<sup>9</sup>

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9 G. E. Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959) p.117

As we read through the whole of the New Testament we learn how deeply Jesus cares for His church. In fact, He is the one who founded it. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus says, ‘And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build **my** [emphasis mine] church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.’ In fact, Acts 20:28 says that the church of God was, ‘obtained with his own blood.’ And Ephesians 5:25-6 (NIV) says that ‘Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy.’

Jesus intimately identifies with the church. So much so that when He confronted Saul during Saul’s rampage of persecution against the Christians in Acts 9 He used a personal pronoun when referring to the church saying, ‘Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting **me** [emphasis mine]?...I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.’ Jesus considers the church His own body. He founded it, bought it with His blood, and identifies with the church as His very own self. This love is the foundational truth behind the gospel.

### *RECONCILED TO GOD AND ONE ANOTHER*

What is astonishing to see is that God not only reconciled individual people to Himself, but also to one another. He creates a people for Himself. 1 Peter 2:10 says, ‘Once you were not a people, but now you are God’s people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.’ And He unifies those people. Ephesians 2:22, ‘In him you are also being built **together** [emphasis mine] for God’s dwelling in the Spirit.’ This new community of people is what God calls the church (Eph. 3:10, CSB).

No longer connected to each other ethnically, the people of God are now connected to one another spiritually and covenantally. The beautiful manifestation of that truth is that our spiritual unity in our ethnic diversity highlights God’s beautiful design for His body.<sup>10</sup> It is God’s idea for the church to be a people who gather,<sup>11</sup> to be those

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10 1 Corinthians 12:12-14

11 Hebrews 10:24-25

brought into fellowship with one another to love and serve God together. God has loved His people from eternity and the pattern He set forth with Israel is the pattern for us today.

### *Universal versus Local*

To understand more about who the church is, there are a couple of distinctions that would be worth our time to consider. The church is often referred to as being ‘universal’ and ‘local.’ One of these words refers to time and the other refers to location. But what really is the difference between the church universal and the local church? Are they just two different words to describe the same thing? If not, how are the two related?

Let’s break this down just a bit.

Immediately before Jesus’ ascension into heaven we read His great commission to go and make disciples of ‘all nations,’ (Matt. 28:18). The early church, in their ministry of preaching the Word, did indeed obey this command by taking the message of salvation to the ends of the earth. Think about the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8 or the Holy Spirit being poured out upon the Gentiles in Acts 10 or Paul’s description of the Gentile inclusion in Ephesians 2. In the concluding book of the Bible, Revelation 7:9 we read:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, ‘Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!’

This is the universal church! These are the chosen people of God, from all time, gathered together before the throne singing praises to the King of Kings. *The universal church is all true believers from all time until the end of time.* That includes both Old Testament and New Testament believers as planned from before time. A special people,

chosen by God, to be with Him forever. The universal church has never been assembled, but one day it will assemble in glory! This universal church is the church comprised of those elect from every nation, from all time, who will gather together before the throne praising the Lord and casting our crowns at His feet (Rev. 4:10). What a glorious thought!

And here's the ringer of it all: God not only created a people for Himself that spans the whole of time, but He placed His chosen people into distinct periods of time. Why? In order to represent Him as a particular people in that time. *These particular people gathering together in a particular time and particular place are what makes up the **local church**.* The universal church is comprised of all these particular people throughout all time. The local church is where our life in the new covenant community gets lived out. Every local church is an expression or manifestation of the universal church.

#### *A DISPLAY OF THE GOSPEL*

In today's commitment-phobic world we find many Christians who claim to be a part of the universal church without formally committing themselves to the local church. They may hop around to different churches depending on who happens to be preaching, how much their kids like the youth group, who's leading music, what place offers the best children's ministry. For others their busy schedule with life may have them at home any given Sunday, listening to a podcast of a sermon or inspirational talk and singing a hymn or praise tune before moving along with their day. We have well-intentioned family members who shirk any kind of institutionalized structures and choose to simply 'do church' at home. But is this what God had in mind for His church?

The local church is God's idea for displaying the gospel to the world today. When we commit ourselves to a local congregation of believers and gather Sunday after Sunday we proclaim our Lord's death and resurrection together to the watching world in our time.

Our weekly gatherings are meant to picture that future Revelation gathering of the church universal. You can't belong to the universal if you're not joined to a local, because it's in the local church where we 'put on' our membership in the universal. Without the local church we are in effect without the gospel witness. God has always been about His glory and His reputation as tied to a *particular* people. This gospel witness of the church is God's idea.

Just as God marked off Old Testament Israel as a distinct people, a special nation for Himself, the story continues. God intends that distinction of being marked off from the world to characterize the local church. Being a part of the universal church simply isn't enough. The entire New Testament is filled with letters to local churches.<sup>12</sup> These churches knew their sheep, and those sheep carried out their duties and responsibilities to one another because they were a part of the same family of believers.

The church is not an accidental by-product of the gospel, it is essential to the gospel. It is the corporate witness of all God has done for His people in Christ. If it *is* God's idea, we Christians better get it right. Why? Because *the church lies at the very center of the eternal purposes of God*. God doesn't save men and women into the world. God saves men and women into churches. Gospel work in the hearts of God's people creates a real, tangible community, a family, a body. The gospel is church-shaped.<sup>13</sup>

The local church is the authority on earth Jesus has instituted to make known this gospel mystery to the world. How can I make this kind of statement? It's because of what God says to us in His Word about His church. We touched on Ephesians 2 and 3 earlier. Paul,

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12 Romans, 1&2 Corinthians, Galatians, Philippians, Colossians, 1&2 Thessalonians, 1&2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, James, 1&2 Peter, 1, 2&3 John, Jude are all letters written to encourage and warn the people of God gathered together in churches.

13 Leeman, Jonathan, *Doctrine of the Church*, lecture

in writing to the Church at Ephesus, is explaining this great gospel **mystery** that has been hidden for ages. What is that mystery?

In him (Jesus) we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the **mystery** of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth **in Christ** as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Eph. 1:7-10, emphasis mine)

The mystery that has been revealed is God's purposeful plan in Christ to unite all things in Him. And Paul continues in chapter 3:6-12:

This mystery is that the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel... To me, though I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ, and to bring to light for everyone what is the plan of the **mystery hidden for ages** in God, who created all things, so that **through the church** the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was according to the **eternal purpose** that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have boldness and access with confidence through our faith in him. (emphasis mine)

He is telling us that the Gentiles are fellow heirs and this gospel message that has been hidden for ages is made known to the Gentiles and to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places **through the church!** The church reveals the mystery. It is the church that gives all of history meaning because the gospel can be seen lived out, walking around in the lives of her people – people from all kinds of socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, and stages of life. The local church is God's plan to display the gospel to the world.

This is why calling yourself a Christian and not committing to a local church is somewhat like claiming to be married; and, yet, there's no wedding ring, all your pictures are selfies, you're never seen together with anyone and you are regularly found eating dinner out, alone. It would be hard for us to believe you truly loved and prized your husband if that were your life. Our commitment to the local church is evidence of our love and commitment to the Lord Jesus and His glory. As believers we should care deeply about God's fame and reputation. We do this by following His instructions, uniting ourselves to a local church!

*INVISIBLE MADE VISIBLE*

Just as a church has a universal aspect and a local aspect, likewise it has an invisible aspect and a visible one. *The invisible church is the church from God's eyes.* Referred to as the 'true church' it is comprised of those who are truly saved. Those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life, those who are 'enrolled in heaven,' (Heb. 12:23). They are the ones who make up the invisible church. The reality is that only God knows those who are truly His (2 Tim. 2:19). Only He knows the spiritual state of each person's heart. Those who are *truly* His are members of the invisible church.

*The visible church is the church from the world's eyes.* The visible church is the church as it exists on earth. The invisible church comprises the visible church, but not all members of the visible church are members of the invisible church. For only God can rightly distinguish His sheep from the wolves.<sup>14</sup> Sadly, there will always be unbelievers in visible churches, those who claim to belong to God, but whose hearts are far from Him.<sup>15</sup> We are reminded of

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14 2 Timothy 2:19

15 See Matthew 13:24: The parable of the wheat and the weeds. This parable highlights God's plan to allow the weeds to grow alongside the wheat until the harvest, the day of judgment. See also Matthew 25:31-46 where Jesus teaches the parable of the sheep and the goats.

this truth in 2 Timothy 2:17-18 when Paul discusses Hymenaeus & Philetus swerving from the truth and also in 4:10 when he talks about Demas' love of the world overpowering him to the point of deserting Paul. While unbelievers may be a part of the visible church, they are not a part of the invisible, eternal church of God.

The local church is where the invisible church is made visible to the world. It's where hidden realities become seen by the world. If you think about it, the church is one of the few aspects of Christian theology that can be observed. This means we need to guard the visible witness of the gospel so when someone asks, 'What is God like?' we can confidently say, 'Look at the church.'<sup>16</sup>

God created the church as a vehicle to get His gospel out to the world, so the local church is not a casual place to meet with God when we feel like it or to have some kind of spiritual experience. The church wasn't created for us to have our needs met. If you are a believer in the Lord Jesus, you are given a job in the local church! You are meant to be a part of this vehicle to display the gospel message of hope to a lost world.

As we've previously noted, the church is God's idea to set apart a people for Himself. The invisible and visible churches are a 'who' not a what, a people not a thing. So a church may call themselves University Baptist Church or The Church on the Hill, but this isn't referencing a building. It's referencing a gathered people of God. The church may meet in a building with a majestic steeple, or it may meet in a high school gym, or it may meet under a designated tree. It's a collective group of individuals, set apart, acting like a billboard advertisement about God. It is a body of believers covenanted together as a visible witness to the world of the gospel. The local church is where the gospel is made visible. The gospel message is the advertisement on the billboard and the church is the display holding up that message. The gospel is the message and

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16 We'll discuss this more in chapter 7, *A Flock with a Job to Do*

the church is where that message is displayed, as God's people are formed by His Word and love one another.

*If you care about the gospel, you should care about the church.* The visible images God gives us in His Word for His people are corporate in nature: branches on a vine, sheep in a fold, parts of a body, members of a household, fellow citizens.<sup>17</sup> God intends for us to be a part of a church in order for the world to 'see' His love displayed through a people. And if the local church is where God intends to make the gospel visible to the world today and you call yourself a believer in the Lord Jesus, why would you risk undermining that witness by not committing to a church? Like a soldier without an army, you cannot fight a war on your own. 'A Christian without a church is a Christian in trouble.'<sup>18</sup> Will you risk treating so lightly what God treats so seriously? God has not abandoned His church, will you?<sup>19</sup>

### *God's Purpose for the Church: Proclamation*

Rosaria Butterfield, a former lesbian and professor of queer theory at Syracuse University was radically converted through the life and ministry of an ordinary pastor and his wife. She understands firsthand the importance of the corporate Christian life and the power of the church's witness to promote the gospel. She emphatically states, 'We are nonnative speakers in this new world culture. We must build strong Christian infrastructure and launch from these.'<sup>20</sup> We are like tiny little lights scattered all around our cities, doing the work God has given us to do and when we gather

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17 John 15:1-5, John 10:14-16, 1 Corinthians 12:12-14, 2:19-20

18 Leeman, Jonathan and Hanse, Collin; *Rediscover Church*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021)

19 We will discuss church membership more fully in Chapter 3, 'A Roaring Fire'

20 Butterfield, Rosaria, *The Gospel Comes with a House Key*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018) p. 42

together as a corporate body on a Sunday morning, we shine the light of Christ with a blaze of glory.

Churches act as little kingdom outposts in the world, or embassies in a foreign land. Want to know what true Christianity is? Look at the local church! This is how missions work happens and continues. Without local churches as these outposts we run the risk of losing the true gospel witness to the next generation. The world needs to see these outposts to understand who the people of God are and what they believe. How is that? you might ask.

In Matthew 16:18, Peter confesses to Jesus that Jesus is indeed the Christ. Jesus responds to this confession saying, ‘You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven...’

There is a lot we could discuss in this small section of Scripture, some of which has caused wars and revolutions in history! But for the purposes of this book I want us simply to see two things: the ‘who’ and the ‘what’ of the gospel. Peter is given the authority to declare on behalf of Jesus first *who* are truly His, and second *what* the gospel truly is. Matthew 18 then makes it clear (in a case of sin within the church needing to be confronted) that the authority given to Peter is also extended to the local church. In effect, Jesus gave the keys of the kingdom to the church. He gave them a job. We can see this played out when the apostle Paul exhorts the Corinthian church to ‘purge the evil person from among you’ (1Cor. 5:13). He understood it was the **church’s** responsibility to exercise the authority of the ‘who’ and ‘what’ of the gospel. The keys of the kingdom are the keys of the gospel:

**Who:** true gospel professors

**What:** true gospel profession

The church’s job is to tell the world **who** belongs to God and **what** is the gospel. In 1 Tim 3:1-15 we read specific qualifications for overseers and deacons, the two biblical offices of the church.

These offices give structure to the church. Paul writes these instructions to Timothy because the church of the living God is 'a pillar and buttress of truth.' This means that the very structure of the church is for the proclamation and protection of the truth, the gospel. A pillar holds the truth of the gospel up on display and the buttress protects and supports that truth. This leads us to our second purpose for the church: protection.

### *God's Purpose for the Church: Protection*

This authority given to the church is not only for the proclamation of the gospel but also for its protection. If you don't know what you believe to be true, how can you protect the truth? If the church corporately protects the gospel witness then each individual's understanding of the Scriptures matter. As the Word dwells richly among us, we sharpen and encourage one another with the truth, both proclaiming it to one another, but also protecting it. It is imperative for us each to individually arm ourselves with the truth of God's Word so together we recognize when an untruth is in our midst. The better we understand the true gospel, the more we'll recognize a false one.

In the United States, Federal agents are trained to spot counterfeit currency through extensive training in genuine currency. They feel, examine and smell the real thing, becoming familiar with every detail. Some are so well versed in the real thing, they can spot a fake blindfolded. By studying the bills intently, the false ones become obvious. Just as training in counterfeit currency begins with studying true currency, knowing the truth of God's Word helps us spot false teaching when it enters the church.

It's why understanding theology and Christian doctrine matters for all members. It's why this book series by women for women is such an invaluable resource. It's why a statement of faith, a set of beliefs held in agreement by the members, is fundamental to all local churches today. We need to know and understand the truths

about God and His Word in order to protect the gospel witness. The keys of the kingdom were given to us by God Himself, so we have a job to do in protecting and promoting the gospel in the church.

If we are governed more by the culture and less by the Word of God, we run the risk of being deceived because we don't recognize counterfeits. This is often how cultural relativism slowly seeps into churches, ruining their witness. This is not to say we should be uninformed about the culture we live in. It is to say we must prioritize our understanding of the truth *over* things like cultural fads or norms. Issues like lighting and sound or whether or not there's a pulpit or overhead projectors become less significant than whether or not the gospel is present in the service. The better we understand the surpassing value of the gospel, the less we'll be prone to wander and drift with every passing fad and fancy. We'll have a mooring, a permanent anchor. We may get pushed by culture, but we won't get taken out to sea. Without firm biblically-grounded convictions, the church runs the risk of looking more like a country club, a self-help group, or a community activist association rather than a saved people bonded together over the gospel of Jesus Christ. As Jonathan Leeman put it:

The local church is the embassy representing Christ's rule across (all) time. The individual Christian does not possess the keys of the kingdom by him or herself. He or she possesses them jointly with the entire congregation.<sup>21</sup>

The purpose of the church is to picture the gospel by proclaiming it to, and protecting it from, the world around her. An embassy is a helpful picture for us to see, not only the church's role, but even our own personal role within her. We are ambassadors for Christ. We represent Him. As a people of God, we have a purpose as a whole that comes to fruition when we fulfill our purposes as

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21 J. Leeman, *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2015) p. 360.

individuals within that whole. It is the job of the whole church, leaders and members, collectively and individually, to protect and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ. Local churches act as an outpost for the gospel, little embassies on street corners in every country all around the world declaring, 'Jesus is Lord, come inside and see what He looks like!'

*THE COSMIC DRAMA OF REDEMPTION*

You've heard it said, 'hindsight is always 20/20.' Looking back things seem so much clearer. My understanding of the church wasn't very clear when I was growing up. I had biblical instincts, but lacked the ability to connect the dots. I knew in my head that church was important and loved the church in my heart, but when my college roommates made their comments about going to church on Sunday, I didn't know how to respond. Today I am able to articulate and understand those convictions more fully in order to share them with others, including our children and other women in my life. I marvel at the gift we've been given by God in the local church, even with her flaws and failings. The church has been given the distinct privilege of preaching the 'unsearchable riches of Christ' to a watching world, 'so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places' (Eph. 3:8,10).

As theologian John Stott said reflecting on this verse:

It is as if a great drama is being enacted. History is the theatre, the world is the stage, and church members in every land are the actors. God himself has written the play, and he directs and produces it. Act by act, scene by scene the story continues to unfold. But who are the audience? They are the cosmic intelligences, the principalities and powers in the heavenly places. We are to think of them as spectators in the drama of

salvation... Thus the history of the Christian church... becomes a graduate school for angels.<sup>22</sup>

The church is a divine idea. It's God's idea. As God's one and only Son, Jesus loved His church so much that He came into the world to die for her, fully and finally securing her to Himself for all eternity. Now she lives as a witness to the world of what God is like and what He has done. The redemptive storyline of the Bible has Jesus, and His bride, the church, as the pinnacle of all history.

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22 John R. .W. Stott, *The Message of Ephesians* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), pp. 123-124.

QUESTIONS

*'A DIVINE IDEA: GOD'S PLAN & PURPOSE FOR THE CHURCH'*

God has a plan and a purpose for the church. The church is and has been God's idea to protect and proclaim His glory to the world through a people, His people. As a display of the gospel, the church is where invisible realities are made visible to the world.

1. How would you define the church? Did it just evolve over time? How did it come to be?
2. How is your definition from question 1 similar and/or different from the idea/description you might have had before you started reading this chapter?
3. Compare and contrast the people of God in the Old Testament and the New Testament.
4. What is the difference between the local and universal church? What is the difference between the visible and invisible church?
5. Can someone choose to be a part of the universal or invisible church without bothering with the local church? Why or why not?
6. Paul talks about this great gospel mystery in Ephesians 1:7-10; 3:6-12. Read those passages. What is the great gospel mystery he refers to?
7. What are the two purposes of God's church?
8. Read Matthew 16:13-20. What are the keys of the kingdom? What authority is Jesus giving to Peter?
9. Why is theology not merely for the leaders of the church? Why should we as women study it?
10. If your friend told you she was a Christian but she was too busy for church, how would you explain the importance of church to her?