

CHURCH

FIRST THINGS FIRST

Take a minute to pray for God to guide you as you study...

Nobody likes to get sick! It's awful! Whether you have a cold, a fever, a cough, or something even worse, it's not fun! Sure, you get to sleep more, but you're really miserable. As a kid, whenever I got sick, my mother would always be there to make me jello or soup, to get me another blanket, or help me find a movie that I wanted. She made being sick so much better! Whatever I needed, she was there to help. Sometimes, in life, we all need help. Of course we need help when we aren't feeling well, but there are plenty of other times where we need a group of people, including family, to help us! That is one of the many reasons why God gave us the Church. (Notice that whenever Church is capitalized, we are referring to the global Christian Church.)

There is an amazing story in the book of Acts, where God uses humans (the Church) to speak into the lives of others and change them forever. Here's how the story goes. Jesus has already died and gone back to Heaven. The disciples, and this is many more than just the 12 that followed Jesus around, were all praying together. Suddenly, a sound like a freight train comes into the room, and tongues of fire hover above everyone's heads. It's pretty crazy, but it was symbolizing the Holy Spirit coming over this group of people. A huge crowd gathers outside the house that they are in, so the disciples go outside and start to tell this group about Jesus! It gets kind of crazy, because not all the people spoke the same language, but the Holy Spirit was translating so everyone could hear the message.

And the Bible says:

Acts 2:41, "Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about _____ thousand were added to their number that day."

Although the Church began way before this group of people, this may be the most well-known story about the Church in action. In fact God created the Church and gave it several different functions and reasons why it exists.

The Church exists to Spread a Message

The Church has a special function: to Spread a Message! The message is the same message that the group of disciples shared outside their house. The message of the Church is all about Jesus, how much God loves us, and how we can have eternal life with Him. In some of the last words that Jesus said before going back to heaven, He tells the church to spread the message!

Matt 28:19-20 says, "Therefore go and make _____ of all nations, _____ them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

The Church has a mission to go to the whole world and preach the message about Jesus to people. Then, as they hear this message and want to be a part of the Church, they are baptized and take on the responsibility to share the message of Jesus to the world, too! The cool part about this message, is that it doesn't have to be shared from a sermon or speech like the disciples did. It can be shared through kindness, generosity, praying with someone, or serving someone else. There are many ways that the message about Jesus can be shared.

The Church exists to Serve Others

Another reason why God created the Church was to Serve Others! In fact, service is at the heart of the message about Jesus. Jesus came to earth to serve others and to die for them. The Church exists to serve others too.

In **Matthew 25:35-36**, Jesus says to us, "For I was _____ and you gave me something to eat, I was _____ and you gave me something to drink, I was a _____ and you invited me in, I needed _____ and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in _____ and you came to visit me."

Do you think that the people He was speaking to actually did all those things? Nope, but they did do them for someone else. The Church was serving others, and because they served others, they were actually serving God.

The Church exists to Help Each Other

One of the major reasons the Church exists is to help each other. Remember the story of the disciples at the beginning of this lesson? Here's what happened as they grew closer to Jesus and to each other too.

Acts 2:44-47 says, "All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved."

They all worked together and helped each other. They made sure everyone had enough to eat and a place to live. They were a community of people that were all thinking the same thing, and they wanted to honor God by helping each other live to their best ability and glorify Him.

BASIC POINT

God created the Church to work with Him in saving others.

But they didn't stop with just the physical needs, they existed to help each other stay true to God's calling on their life. They helped them when they were discouraged, when they were losing faith, when they didn't know where to go. They would counsel each other and give each other wisdom on what God might be trying to tell them. They supported and uplifted each other when they were struggling. It was a community that existed to help each other.

Is it weird to read these descriptions of the church and wonder why it isn't always like this? Sometimes it feels like the Church is ONLY a worship service once a week that is to help the church members get their "Jesus-fix," and then they wait till the next week to do it all again. Sometimes it feels like the Church has gotten so far away from God's design, and it really doesn't exist for His purpose anymore. That brings us to another important question that so many people have...

Why are there so many different denominations?

Great question! Satan, as we've said before, is a master of counterfeits. He will do anything and everything to disguise lies as truth. He wants nothing more than to pull people away from God and everything God asks of humans. And, he has done a masterful job of confusing humans about what Church really is! He has deceived church families across the globe to only think about themselves and become consumers that only come to be fed or only participate in church "if their needs are being met," or "if the worship style is right," or "if the preacher is any good." Satan has deceived humans to think that traditions and methods are more important than what God really says! We see this in church doctrine, which is a fancy word for what churches believe. Here are some examples:

- 1: Worshipping on any day rather than the Sabbath
- 2: Believing that people go to Heaven when they die
- 3: Confessing to priests rather than Jesus
- 4: Worshipping traditions (music styles, ways of doing things, etc.) instead of worshipping God

So, because the Devil has worked so hard to distort the Church that God designed, we have confused doctrine and made it what we have been told rather than understanding what God's design really is. Most denominations choose to understand the Bible "through the lens" of tradition, and it distorts doctrine. And this has happened until most people will say, *"Doctrine doesn't matter any more. I believe in Jesus, and that's all I need to know."* Without Jesus, you have **NOTHING!** But the beautiful part of doctrine is that it describes Who God is! All the doctrines show His character. They help us understand what He is really like!

Which denomination is the right one?

So is there a "right" denomination? That's a really great question, and if you asked someone from each denomination, they would probably tell you that THEY are the right one. Here's the deal. There will come a time when God judges people for Who they are following. He's given some pretty specific identifiers as to who His people are. In fact, in the book of Revelation, He makes it very specific. He talks about the "Remnant" people. What's that??? I'm glad you asked...

Have you ever been to a fabric store? Every fabric store I've ever been in has a remnant pile. Usually it's a table that has the last bit of cloth from every roll. It's just the last remaining piece.

God calls this group of people the Remnant people, because they are the last remaining people that honor Him and obey Him. Here's what He says:

Revelation 12:17: "Then the dragon (Satan) was enraged at the woman (the Church) and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring (the remnant)--those who keep God's _____ and hold fast their testimony about Jesus."

At the end of time, there won't be a "right" denomination, but a group of people that 'keep the commandments of God and the testimony of Jesus.' It can be Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, Seventh-day Adventists...it can be ANYBODY! And I believe that God will draw people from all different denominations to follow Him and honor Him with how they live and what they do.

Church is more than just something you DO once a week, it's something that you are a part of! The Church is on a mission to tell the world about Jesus, and I desperately want to be a part of the remnant group of people that will do whatever it takes to follow Jesus!

FUNDAMENTAL QUESTIONS

1. What are some other reasons the Church exists?
2. Why do you believe your denomination has truth?

