

What Is the Church

by Alan Redpath

The Church is a spiritual family composed of believers in Jesus Christ, with a double responsibility to God and to brothers and sisters in the same spiritual family, and it is through the united testimony of a fellowship that people without God and without hope are reached for the Lord.

Duration: 34:55

Scripture: Acts 8:1-15, Ephesians 4:12

Topics: "Church"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker discusses the importance of the church in the Christian faith. He emphasizes that God reaches people through other people, and the church is the instrument through which believers can win others for Christ. The speaker references the book of Acts, specifically chapter 8, to highlight the persecution faced by the early church in Jerusalem and their subsequent scattering throughout the region. He also emphasizes the double responsibility of Christians, both to God as their Father and to their fellow believers as their brothers and sisters in the spiritual family. The speaker warns against spiritual isolationism and encourages Christians to embrace their family responsibilities within the church.

Transcript

Now just a word of prayer together, let us pray. Our Father, we thank Thee so much for this fellowship met together here tonight, gathered from different parts of this land and from many parts of the world. We thank Thee that here we can know a fellowship that goes so deep that we discover that we're all one in Christ our Lord.

We thank Thee for Thy Church, whom Thou hast gathered out of every land and every nation in order that there may be made known to principalities and powers the glory of the Lord Jesus through the Church. We ask Thy blessing upon the remaining moments of this evening hour of worship. We ask it for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Our subject for this evening in the concluding message on the series, Learning to Live, in which we have been talking together about some of the great words of the Christian faith such as sin, repentance, faith, surrender, sanctification, the Holy Spirit and so on. A series which we've been considering for several weeks, indeed two or three months now.

For the last of these in this series we come to consider the question, what is the Church? Now this is an important subject and in the next few moments I'm going to take you through different verses of the Word

of God in order that we might understand from Scripture what is the Church. But before I do that, let me just lay the foundation of our message briefly for a moment and remind you that just as children are born into families and therefore have a double responsibility to their parents and to their brothers and sisters, so in the spiritual family a Christian has a double responsibility. First of all to God as his Father and then to his brothers and sisters in the same spiritual family.

The Christian has this twofold responsibility. If he knows Jesus Christ personally in his life, then God is his Father and all who know the Lord are his brothers and sisters. Now you know some Christian people are a law entirely to themselves and they follow Christ as individuals.

They are spiritual isolationists and they fail to accept their family responsibilities. And mind you they often do that in the name of a very deep and high spirituality. But you see when you belong to the Lord, you belong to his Church, you belong to his body.

And in practice that means that you belong and support loyally a local fellowship of Christian people. But perhaps you might excuse yourself by saying that where you live there is no place which is true to the Bible and true to the Gospel. Well now just remember that no church is perfect.

You have to wait to heaven till you get to heaven for a perfect church. And you recall how Paul deplored the party spirit that existed in Corinth. I am of Paul and I am of Apollos and I am of Cephas and worst of all I am of Christ.

No party affiliation whatsoever. You see the Bible tells us that affiliation with a church, membership of a church, is not optional for a Christian. It is a command to be obeyed.

And the Christian who goes from one place of worship to another is useless in the body of Christ. Loyalty involves attendance and participation in the devotional and missionary and evangelistic work of a local fellowship, as well as sacrificial giving to maintain its testimony. Of course it's true that many churches are unspiritual and unscriptural.

Many of them do not doubt and deny the authority of the Word of God. But let's just remind ourselves tonight that such places can never be helped by criticism, but they can be helped by prayer. Our Lord attended the synagogue regularly.

It was anything but spiritual. Now I'm not advocating the attendance of a Christian at a church which is unspiritual and unscriptural, where he has an alternative where the Word of God is faithfully preached. But I am saying that where there's no alternative, a Christian cannot escape responsibility for attending a local place of worship simply because he judges the place to be unsound.

The prayers of that Christian and the prayers of other people could revolutionize the testimony of that local church. Now with this as our background for a moment, let's ask ourselves one or two questions. In the first place, how did the church begin to exist? Well of course it depends upon what you mean by the church.

The Bible distinguishes between what we call the church that is visible and the church that is invisible. The second of these, the church which is invisible, is composed of all who belong by faith in Jesus Christ our Lord and therefore are members of his body. That is the church.

Look with me a moment at Ephesians chapter 5 and verse 25. And here Paul has something to say to us about the church, this church, the body of Christ. He says in this chapter, in dealing with the church in particular, the invisible church, husbands love your wives even as Christ also loved the church and gave himself for it.

He loved the church and gave himself for it. The church, the invisible church, that is to say the body of our Lord, composed of all who know him as Savior, who've received him into their lives irrespective of their country, their nationality, their color, all who have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ and who are therefore indwelt by his Holy Spirit, are members of this church which was purchased by the precious blood of the Lord Jesus. It was conceived in the mind of God from all eternity but at the cross it was purchased by the Lord Jesus Christ and it was born on the day of Pentecost.

And ever since that day the church has been indwelt by the Holy Spirit and energized by the Holy Spirit. The church is a very wonderful thing. Have you ever asked yourself how many Christians, how many people were ready to join it when it was born? When the Lord Jesus rose from the dead, how many believers do you think were ready to become members of the church? Just look at some thrilling verses with me a moment.

In the 28th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, here is the risen Lord speaking to the disciples and this is what he says to them. 28th chapter and verse 16. The eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them.

There were eleven of them. The outcome of the ministry of our Lord left behind him eleven people who were believers. Eleven people who had come through the testing of the cross, the rejection of Christ and these men were now ready to become members of the church.

If you turn over your Bible to the Acts of the Apostles and the first chapter and the 15th verse you find that this number has increased somewhat. For here in the first chapter of the Acts and the 15th verse we read that in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples and said the number of names together were about a hundred and twenty. The eleven have now increased and there are now one hundred and twenty people who are ready to be members of the church and it was this group of a hundred and twenty who on the day of Pentecost as they prayed and waited upon God, a sound came from heaven and they received the Holy Spirit and they were born anew and they came to be indwelt by the divine nature of the Lord Jesus and we might say that these were the charter members of the church, the body of Christ.

You will recall that when Paul wrote to the church at Corinth in the 15th chapter and the 6th verse he said that the risen Christ was seen by upwards of five hundred brethren. So the eleven have become a hundred and twenty and the hundred and twenty became five hundred. But in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles and the 41st verse we read they that gladly received his word were baptized and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls.

So the eleven become a hundred and twenty and the hundred and twenty become five hundred and the five hundred now become three thousand five hundred and the 47th verse of the same chapter the Lord added to the church daily such as should be said. And in the fourth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles and in the fourth verse we read many of them which heard the word believed and the number of the men was about five thousand. And in the same chapter and verse 32 the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul.

You notice the growth, the tremendous sensational phenomenal growth of the body of Christ. Eleven, hundred and twenty, five hundred, three thousand, five hundred additions, five thousand men now a multitude. And in Acts chapter 5 and verse 14 believers were the more added to the Lord multitudes in the plural both of men and of women.

And now we've lost count all together and in the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles and the seventh verse the word of God increased and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly. I think it's thrilling to observe what happens when the Spirit of God is really at work. Here's the body of Christ born.

Here's this group of people that was only a little handful of eleven. Now we've lost all count and they've been added to them and now they've multiplied. Oh how thrilling it is and yet how humiliating.

You see in those days, in those days Christians and church members were one and the same thing. They believed the gospel, they received Christ, they repented of sin, they trusted of the Lord and they became members of his body and of the local assembly of believers. Now that's not true today.

Every true Christian listening to my voice tonight is a member of the invisible body of Christ. You've been born again into a fellowship. But not all such are loyal worshipping members of a visible congregation.

If I happen to speak to someone tonight who is a Christian and who is not a member of a local assembly, I say without any hesitancy that you are disobeying God. No real Christian obedient to the Lord can function independently. He is a member of a fellowship and has a responsibility to a local group.

On the other hand, today many are members of a visible church who are not true believers and are not members of the body of Christ. Many have joined a local group but they have never been born of God's Spirit, identified with the invisible church which is his body. Today there are a multiplication of churches but alas few additions and no multiplications.

You know the first five centuries, if you know a little bit of church history, in the first five centuries the church maintained more or less its purity and its unity. But there came the dark ages of division when the church suffered persecution until there came movement of the Holy Spirit in the time of the Reformation. And since that day the visible church in the world by and large, broadly speaking, has been divided into two main groups, the Roman Catholic and the Protestant.

The first of these groups teach that membership of their church brings a man into relationship with God. The second of these groups, the Protestant group, teaches that relationship with God brings a man into membership of the church. They're as different as that.

And it is on this foundation, this second foundation, which runs right through the New Testament that all evangelical churches stand. Once a man is a child of God through the new birth, once he has been born from above he is a member of the invisible church and with that privilege goes the responsibility of uniting with a local church. Joining a church or attending one never makes a man a Christian.

But once he is a Christian he will never neglect his responsibility to worship with other people. I think it's important to say these things because some of us just don't accept that responsibility. But listen, this is what I want to get at this evening.

What does joining a church involve? What does it mean in my life to become a member of a local fellowship? It means several things that you will never know without it. In the first place it means Christian

fellowship. Christianity is social as well as personal.

Christians are personally related to the Lord and they're personally related to each other. The church is a fellowship. The members of it are a congregation, not an aggregation.

That is to say they're a flock joined together, not added together as independent units. The word in the New Testament for fellowship is koinonia, communion, fellowship, a togetherness, a oneness, members of the body of Christ, members of one another. Christian fellowship, there's nothing like it in all the world.

Nothing like it in all the world. There's no Christian fellowship that's perfect, but oh it's so wonderful to be members one of another. Brethren and sisters, listen to me.

You've got to be very careful how you treat the church, very careful how you handle the body of Christ, that you don't grieve the Spirit of God. When you join the local church you become involved in Christian fellowship. You become also involved in worship.

There's a significant word spoken to us by the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews in the 10th chapter and the 24th verse that I would like just to read to you this evening. It says this, let us consider one another to provoke each other. Now lots of people provoke each other, but it says a bit more than that.

It says to provoke one another unto love and to good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is, but exhorting one another and so much the more as you see the day, that is the coming of the Lord, approaching. You notice what we are reading? We are to consider one another to provoke each other unto love and to good works, and this is something that can be done through the assembling together of the people of God. You know, when a Christian fails to observe this responsibility, it means a cooling off in the whole spiritual temperature of the church.

When one Christian fails to pull his weight in a local assembly, the witness of the whole assembly is weakened. When one Christian sits on the sidelines and criticizes everything that's done, he lowers the spiritual temperature all around him. The eye of your body can see, and the ear can hear, and the hand can work, only as each of them is in the place that God has put them.

I'm reminded, of course, in a different context of the word that Jonathan spoke to David, in which he said, uh, thou shalt be missed because thy seat will be empty. I hope that isn't true of any of us. May I say we're very thankful for the privilege of broadcasting our service, but may I say to our radio audience that radio listening is no substitute for church attendance.

The radio can make it too easy. It's the assembling of ourselves together as a group that brings the presence and the power of the Spirit of God into that group, and it's every Christian pulling his weight for the glory of God and working together as a fellowship and as a team for his glory, which pleases our Lord. When I join a church, I'm introduced, therefore, to fellowship and to this wonderful, wonderful experience of united corporate worship.

I'm also introduced into one of the main ways in which we can grow as Christians. Ephesians chapter 4 and verse 12 is a verse that's often in our minds and thinking, I'm sure, I'd like just to ask you to look at it for a moment tonight, where Paul is speaking about the church and the gifts of God to the church, and this is what he says in verse 11. He gave some apostles and some prophets and some evangelists and some pastors and teachers for the perfecting or for the adjustment or for the maturing of the saints or for the joining together of the saints, the equipment of the saints, for their work, for their work of ministry, for the

edifying of the body of Christ.

You see, it's in the fellowship of the Christian church that you grow. Last night at El Masel branch church down the road, we had a farewell meeting for a very dear friend who has been pastor there for nearly three years, Pastor Jim Johnson. He's leaving to take further study in Michigan University, and in the course of his brief word last evening, he said that when he came to the church and when he met the board of elders concerning his appointment, he said to them that he felt this task to be one of great responsibility because he felt so immature in his own Christian life.

And the answer of one member of that board to him which brought him great encouragement was, well, we'll grow together. And you know that's the very wonderful thing about Christian fellowship, that's exactly what we do. We grow together.

No Christian can grow if he's an isolationist. No Christian can grow properly except within the fellowship of the Christian church where God has given gifts in order that we might be helped to grow. It's a vital factor in the growth of a Christian to be a member of a local church.

That's where he grows. How does he grow? Well, he grows by the study of the word with other people. He grows by sharing the experiences of the Christian life and testimony.

He grows by mutual and public prayer. He grows by learning to work with people he doesn't like. He grows by learning to walk with God and with others who are of different temperaments.

He grows by learning to disagree with people agreeably without breaking fellowship. He grows by learning to differ in opinion from other people without involving separation from them. He grows by learning that he can love people who naturally he wouldn't like, and in all these different ways within the church he begins to grow.

Oh, there's so many, so many opportunities for Christian growth that a man can only know within the fellowship of the Christian church. And then, of course, he's introduced to a tremendous privilege of service. What did the church do in the New Testament? Let's just look for a moment briefly, scan quickly through the Acts of the Apostles to see some of the things that the church did.

Second chapter of Acts, and in verse 47, Acts 2 and verse 47. They were praising God and having favor with all the people, and the Lord added to the church daily, such as should be saved. One of the things the church did was it became the instrument through whom God reached unconverted people.

I believe that the Bible teaches us that God only reaches men through men. And I believe that his great instrument in winning others for Christ is the Christian church, is the fellowship of believing people. And it is through the united testimony of a fellowship that the people who are without God and without hope are one for the Lord.

The church received the same. In the eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, the eighth chapter in the first verse, we read this. At that time there was a great persecution against the church which was at Jerusalem, and they were all scattered abroad throughout the region of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

The church suffered persecution. God permitted this, and in the suffering of persecution it was scattered abroad. It became a missionary church because it was persecuted and driven to it.

Now the church of Jesus Christ today, and this day in which we live, is going through that very thing in different areas. Perhaps no more so than in Congo, in China, in Korea, where people who have stood for their faith have sometimes paid the very supreme price for it. But it's always true that growth comes through persecution.

And it's through times like this that the church is scattered everywhere, and other people who would never have heard the message of the gospel are hearing it. It's such a wonderful thing, and I'm sure you know about it, to discover how so many countries in the last ten years have heard the message of the gospel that would never have heard it if it hadn't been for the persecution of the church in China, and how many missionaries and Chinese Christians had been driven from that country to preach the gospel in other lands. They were scattered everywhere.

The church therefore receives the unconverted, and the church suffers persecution. The church did other things in the Acts of the Apostles. For instance, in the 14th chapter and the 23rd verse, the church ordained elders.

And when they had ordained them elders in every church and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord on whom they believed. A church must have organization. It must have recognized a leadership and recognized authority.

And from the very beginning of this body of Christ, the visible church was under the spiritual leadership of spiritual men. They ordained elders. And the early church rejoiced with her missionaries in verse 27 of the same chapter when they were come and gathered the church together, rehearsed all that God had done with them, and how he had opened the door of faith unto the Gentiles.

The church has that wonderful, unique joy of sharing the victory of those who've gone forth in its name to preach the word. The church had a missionary program in the 15th chapter and the 3rd verse, being brought on their way by the church. Right from the very beginning, the church was a missionary society concerned about the evangelization of the world.

And these missionaries are brought on their way. They're supported by the church. And no true local fellowship can possibly compare to that.

They claim to be in line with the word of God unless it has a missionary vision. And if I may say so, far wider than its denomination. And the church faced problems.

22nd verse of the same chapter, Acts chapter 15, tells us, There's much more that could be said, but let's just pause a moment and say this to each other. You see, you have here in the word of God, the Lord beginning to build this wonderful fellowship. And you remember that he said in his day upon earth, that he would make his church so strong that the gates of hell should never prevail against it.

Matthew 16, 18. And the force of that word does not suggest that the gates of hell are attacking, but rather defending, and that the church of Jesus Christ is on the attack. And even the gates of hell cannot stand against it.

That's true of the invisible church. May I say that it also should be true of the visible church? Why is it that it isn't true? I'll tell you. It is failing in the basic purpose for which God created it.

It is failing in that which was supposed to be in the mind of our Lord, its greatest glory, when he prayed in his high priestly prayer that we all might be one, that the world might believe. My dear friend, that is not a prayer for uniformity, but it is a prayer for unity. And the church is failing today, the Protestant church, failing desperately because it is so tragically divided over secondary issues.

Each one of us here has a positive contribution to make to maintain the unity of the fellowship of the body of Christ. We are one in spirit. We have been born of the Spirit of God, redeemed by the blood of Christ.

We're in one great family, and the days are so desperate that the church cannot afford the luxury of civil war. And that's exactly what's happening today, taking away the power and effectiveness of our testimony, and this is one of the saddest reasons of our failure. In conclusion, may I ask you just one or two very simple, straight questions.

First, are you a member of the church of Christ? I mean the invisible church. Has there been a moment in your life when you've come to the end of your own effort to get right with God, and you've received Jesus Christ into your life as your Savior, and you've been born of his Spirit, and you've become a member of his body? Has there been a moment? If not, make that moment now. That's how you join the church, in repentance and faith, in Christ crucified and risen, you become a member of his body.

If you have, are you a member of his visible church? If not, join a local fellowship at the earliest possible moment, somewhere where you will receive help in the word of God, fellowship with other Christians, where you will be caused to grow, and where you will have an opportunity of service. But may I say, if you are a member of the invisible church, and you are a member of the visible church, what contribution are you making towards its testimony, towards its oneness? Are you a Christian who is aloof, alone, critical, or are you a Christian who is pulling his weight in the team, in the fellowship, pitching in with everything you've got, with the wholehearted consecration of your life, and abandonment of your life to the Lord, and to his church? Let's ask ourselves these questions as we bow for a word of prayer together. Shall we pray? O God our Father, we thank thee for this, the body of the Lord Jesus, thy church, and as we think of this tremendous fellowship scattered throughout all the world, how we thank thee that there's coming a day, and coming soon, when our Savior shall come and take his church to be with him.

We pray that each of us may be ready for that day, because we're members of his body. And we ask thee, our Heavenly Father, that every one of us here, and listening to this service, may be taking a vital, practical part in the unity, and testimony, and worship of the local church. Lord, grant that each of us may pull our weight for thy glory.

Deliver us, Lord, from merely sitting on the side. Give to us the joy of service, and witness, and testimony. And grant that every one of our lives may be usable, because they've been cleansed in the precious blood of Christ, and indwelt by his Holy Spirit.

We ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

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