

VINTAGE
CHURCH

TIMELESS TRUTHS *and* TIMELY METHODS

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Vintage Church: Timeless Truths and Timely Methods

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CHAPTER TWO

WHAT IS A CHRISTIAN CHURCH?

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done.

ACTS 2:42-43



A few billion people worship Jesus Christ as God every week and do so in the church as the church. Yet, if you walk into various churches and ask the people who comprise that church what the word *church* means, the odds are that you will get either a blank stare or a series of conflicting definitions.

Sadly, this is even true from their pastors. In preparing for this book I asked various pastors of some of America's largest churches—godly men and dear friends—if they have a working definition of the church. And not one of them did; they confessed they were giving their lives to building something for which they did not even have a clear definition.

Their response was not surprising, because for much of the history of the church the definition of church has simply been assumed. For example, the Nicene Creed says, “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.” Yet, it does not define what is meant by “church” but rather assumes that we already know.

The assumption that Christians innately know what the church

is has a long history. The early church debated many things, such as the Trinity and the relationship between the humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ. However, one issue it did not debate was what constitutes the church. After Cyprian, bishop of Carthage, wrote *The Unity of the Church* in AD 251 until Wycliffe wrote *The Church* in 1378, there was no significant monograph on the church.¹

Everything changed in the sixteenth century when the Reformation forced Protestants and Roman Catholics alike to actually define church. This led to numerous definitions and debates, which continue to this day with no widespread agreement. For example, the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* says:

The Arnoldists emphasized poverty and identification with the masses; the Waldenses stressed literal obedience to Jesus' teachings and emphasized evangelical preaching. Roman Catholics claimed that the only true church was that over which the pope was supreme as successor of the apostle Peter. The Reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin, following John Wycliffe, distinguished between the visible and invisible church, claiming that the invisible church consists of the elect only. Thus an individual, including the pope, might be a part of the visible church but not a part of the invisible and true church."²

Part of the confusion is that the Greek word *ekklēsia*, which is translated "church," has a wide range of meaning.³ Originally, it sometimes designated any public assembly, including a full-blown riot.⁴ In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament), the word is translated *qāhāl*, which designates the assembly of God's people.⁵ So in the New Testament *ekklēsia* may signify the assembly of the Israelites.⁶ Most of the uses of the word *ekklēsia* in the New Testament designate the Christian church, both the local church⁷ and the universal church.⁸

The English word *church* derives from the Greek word *kyriakon*,

¹T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 266.

²R. L. Omanson, "The Church," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), 231.

³Ibid.

⁴Acts 19:32, 39, 41.

⁵Deut. 10:4; 23:2-3; 31:30; Ps. 22:23.

⁶Acts 7:38; Heb. 2:12.

⁷Matt. 18:17; Acts 15:41; Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 4:17; 7:17; 14:33; Col. 4:15.

⁸Matt. 16:18; Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 12:28; 15:9; Eph. 1:22.

which means “the Lord’s.”⁹ Later it came to mean the Lord’s house, a church building. This increases the confusion because nowhere in the New Testament does *church* in any of its forms refer to a building. Wayne Grudem helpfully summarizes the uses of *church*:

A “house church” is called a “church” in Romans 16:5 (“greet also *the church in their house*”), 1 Corinthians 16:19 (“Aquila and Prisca, together with *the church in their house*, send you hearty greetings in the Lord”). The church in an entire city is also called “a church” (1 Cor. 1:2; 2 Cor. 1:1; and 1 Thess. 1:1). The church in a region is referred to as a “church” in Acts 9:31: “So *the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria* had peace and was built up.” Finally, the church throughout the entire world can be referred to as “the church.” Paul says, “Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up for her” (Eph. 5:25) and says, “God has appointed *in the church* first apostles, second prophets, third teachers . . .” (1 Cor. 12:28). . . . We may conclude that the group of God’s people considered at any level from local to universal may rightly be called “a church.”¹⁰

Various Christian traditions are prone to define the church—or their church—in an unhealthy and reductionistic manner, focusing on one primary metaphor at the expense of the full breadth of New Testament teaching. As a result, they become imbalanced in some way and therefore unhealthy. For example, the corporate church is referred to as the bride of Christ. The result of overemphasizing this metaphor is the effeminate nature of much of evangelical preaching and singing.¹¹

We must devote this chapter to defining the *being* of the church before we turn to the *well-being* of the church in the rest of the book. The definition of what constitutes a Christian church is vitally important, especially in our day when cultists and oddball, self-appointed spiritual gurus keep starting various kinds of pseudo-churches. The church is also a hot issue among younger pastors today. In previous generations, singles’ ministry, student ministry, and parachurch ministry were the hot options for entrepreneurial young leaders. But today the hot ministry is church planting in every form. This includes churches within

⁹1 Cor. 11:20; Rev. 1:10.

¹⁰Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 857.

¹¹This is what David Murrow speaks of in his book *Why Men Hate Going to Church* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004).

churches seeking to reach people outside the existing church, house churches, multi-campus churches, and traditional church planting. This phenomenon is spreading across all denominational and theological traditions, often with no clear understanding of exactly what a church is or does.

Furthermore, the effort to cultivate the most innovative and effective postmodern church has led to a market of books that nearly always start with some word followed by “church,” such as *Liquid Church*, *Emerging Church*, *Organic Church*, *Missional Church*, *Multi-Site Church*, *Externally Focused Church*, *House Church*, *Future Church*, *Ancient-Future Church*, *Blogging Church*, and *Prevailing Church*. What is curious about most of the books on the church is that very rarely do any of them actually define what the church is, or even clarify what the church does. Instead, most of the books simply share best practices gleaned from “successful” churches. This is curious because without a definition of what a church is or does, I’m unsure how we can even deem one successful. Therefore, we will establish a definition of the local church:

The local church is a community of regenerated believers who confess Jesus Christ as Lord. In obedience to Scripture they organize under qualified leadership, gather regularly for preaching and worship, observe the biblical sacraments of baptism and Communion, are unified by the Spirit, are disciplined for holiness, and scatter to fulfill the Great Commandment and the Great Commission as missionaries to the world for God’s glory and their joy.

This definition is summarized from Acts 2. As we study through that text, we will see eight characteristics of the true local church, which is an incarnation of the universal church. I believe understanding these characteristics will be helpful to many churches and their leaders, thanks to Gerry’s helpful insights gleaned over many decades of study on this issue. A true church is one characterized by:

- 1) Regenerated church membership
- 2) Qualified leadership
- 3) Preaching and worship
- 4) Rightly administered sacraments
- 5) Spirit unity
- 6) Holiness

- 7) The Great Commandment to love
- 8) The Great Commission to evangelize and make disciples.

1) The church is made up of regenerated believers in Jesus.¹² There are unbelievers and outsiders who join the meetings and have an important place in the extended community, as we see in passages such as 1 Corinthians 14:22–25. Likewise, children are welcomed into the church to be loved and served so that they will become Christians with saving faith and then church members. Therefore, the church is a community manifesting the supernatural life of the triune God.

2) The church is organized under qualified and competent leadership. For example, we see the leadership role of the apostles in Acts, including their unique role in teaching (2:42), their receiving of gifts (4:35–5:2), their leading the congregation in wise decision making about a potentially divisive problem (6:1–6), and their sending Peter and John to Samaria to confirm the authenticity of the evangelistic outbreak there (8:14). We also see the church appointment of elders in Acts 14:23. In Acts 15 they practice their leadership in a doctrinal dispute with the party of the Pharisees in Jerusalem. In Acts 6 is the beginning of what were likely deacons appointed to oversee service.

3) The church regularly gathers to hear God's Word rightly preached and to respond in worshipful ways. The church is under apostolic authority. As such, it is a learning and growing church. In the early church, people eagerly devoted themselves to the teaching of the apostles,¹³ not because they had to but because their regenerated hearts wanted to. They had received the Spirit, seen remarkable miracles, and witnessed great conversion growth. But they also refused a simple experience-based Christianity.

As disciples, they knew they needed to learn, and so they studied not just for information but also for transformation in all of their life. Therefore, the church studies Scripture to show submission to the apostolic authority of the Word of God. We believe in the apostolic gift for church planting and movement leading, but we do not believe there are apostles in the same sense today, insofar as being able to write books of the Bible and such; rather, their teaching authority comes to us in Scripture. From the very beginning, the church recog-

¹²Acts 2:38–41.

¹³Acts 2:42.

nized the unique authority of the apostolic writings and immediately canonized them as divinely inspired, just like the Old Testament Scriptures.

The church was also a worshipping community where believers praised God and had favor with all people.¹⁴ Worship is a response to the revelation of the Lord consisting of both adoration and proclamation of the greatness of God and his mighty works¹⁵ and of serving him by living out his character in gracious service to others. It is both *proskuneo*, literally to fall down and kiss Jesus' feet in an expression of one's allegiance to and adoration for God,¹⁶ and *latreia* or *leitourgeo*, which is ministering, or doing work and service in the world in the name of Jesus.¹⁷

4) The church is where the biblical sacraments of baptism and Communion are performed regularly.

5) The church is unified by God the Holy Spirit. In this way the unified life of the Trinity is manifested among God's people who live in loving unity together as the church.

6) The church is a holy people. When they sin, they repent of their sin. If someone should fail to repent, the church and its leaders lovingly enact biblical church discipline in hopes of bringing the sinner to repentance and to a reconciled relationship with God and his people.

7) The church is a loving community that devotes itself to fellowship, or *koinonia*. Fellowship includes God's people living together in intentional, relational community to seek the well-being of one another in every way, including physical, spiritual, material, and emotional. This most misunderstood word speaks of the church as having a close association involving mutual interests and sharing, characterized by an attitude of good will that manifests in generosity, altruism, and sharing one's possessions because of joint participation in the Spirit and mutual interest in Jesus.¹⁸ For fellowship, the church gathers regularly¹⁹ for such things as worship, learning, sacrament, and encouragement. But even when it is not gathered, it is still the church. There is a Spirit-bond of belonging and mission that unites the believers wherever they are,

¹⁴Act 2:47.

¹⁵Acts 2:11.

¹⁶Matt. 2:11; 4:9; 8:2; 28:9; Rev. 19:10.

¹⁷Rom. 1:9; 12:1; Rev. 7:15.

¹⁸"*Koinonia*," in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (BDAG), ed. and rev. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

¹⁹Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 5:4; 11:17–20; 14:23–26; Heb. 10:25.

in the same way that a family is still a family even when Dad is at work, Mom is at the store, and the kids are at school.

8) The church is an evangelistic community where the gospel of Jesus is constantly made visible by its preaching, its witness of the members, and its Spirit-empowered life of love. From the first day “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved”²⁰ because they took Jesus’ command seriously: “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”²¹

As we now examine various ways that the church has been defined throughout history, our hope is to inform you of some of the important differences between definitions of what constitutes the true church and to help you be discerning in what church you would choose for fellowship. We will begin with the church in which I was baptized as an infant and raised, the Roman Catholic Church, before proceeding to other definitions held by Reformed Protestantism, which I have adhered to since Jesus saved me at the age of nineteen and which Gerry has been involved in since he was an infant.

CATHOLICS: ROMAN, EASTERN, AND ANGLICAN

Catholicism in its various forms stresses the historical and institutional nature of the church. We see this in the official definition of the Catholic Church as found in the documents of Vatican II in chapter 1 of “The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church”: the church is defined as simultaneously “visible structure” and “the Mystical Body of Christ.”²² To further explain this, the document continues, “After his resurrection our Saviour handed her [the church] over to Peter to be shepherded (John 21:27), commissioning him and the other apostles to propagate and govern her. . . . This church, constituted and organized in the world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the Bishops in communion with him.”²³

The document goes on to explain how the church is to be orga-

²⁰Acts 2:47.

²¹Acts 1:8.

²²W. Abbott and J. Gallagher, eds., “Lumen Gentium,” 1, 8, in *The Documents of Vatican II* (USA: Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), 22. (Also available online here: http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html).

²³*Ibid.*, 23.

nized. First, we are told that Jesus Christ appointed Peter to lead the apostles, granting to them special power and authority. Second, they then appointed bishops as their successors to continue this proverbial chain of command from one generation to the next, all the way to our present day. Third, the bishops appointed men as priests and deacons to assist them in ministry and “share the sacerdotal dignity” of the bishops and are granted special power, including the power to re-represent the sacrifice of Jesus Christ during the Mass.²⁴

Summarily, the Catholic concept of the church as an institution inaugurated by God with a clear hierarchy that is to be maintained through successive generations “has been a standard feature of Roman Catholic ecclesiology from the late middle ages until the middle of the present century.”²⁵

Roman Catholic theologians see the church primarily as a worldwide clerical hierarchy under the bishops who are successors of the authority of the apostles, with the bishop of Rome being the successor of Peter. They support this from such passages as 2 Timothy 2:2, “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.” They also see the church as a eucharistic society, the organism through which God dispenses his grace through the sacraments. Subsequently, only in the Catholic Church can people receive the grace of God.

Anglican theologian Kevin Giles says, “Almost word for word, apart from the claim for the Papacy, Anglo Catholics [Anglicans] conceive of the church in exactly these terms. . . . For the Anglo Catholic, even more so than the Roman Catholic, the threefold form of the ministry (i.e., bishops, priests, and deacons) is constitutive of the being of the church.”²⁶

In response to the Protestant Reformation, the Roman Catholic Counter-Reformation emphasized the visible nature of the church as synonymous with the invisible nature of the church. Perhaps one of the clearest expressions of this error came from Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621) who said, “The church is a society as visible and as palpable as are the community of the people of Rome, or the kingdom of France, or the Republic of Venice.”²⁷

²⁴Ibid., 53.

²⁵Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 26.

²⁶Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 9.

²⁷Ibid., 192.

For me personally, this definition is very troubling. I was baptized and raised in the Catholic Church as a member of a practicing Catholic family. Furthermore, I spent a few years as an altar boy assisting the priest in Mass as a visible leader in the church. I too sadly believed that because I was a member of the church partaking in Communion, my eternal salvation was secure. I wrongly believed that the church was the mediator between me and God.

It was not until the age of nineteen, while reading Romans in my college dorm room, that God the Holy Spirit regenerated me, giving me faith to trust in Jesus alone for my salvation. This happened apart from any church. Both the teaching of Scripture and the work of the Holy Spirit to regenerate me through the power of the gospel made me a member of the invisible church despite the fact I had already lived my life as a member of the visible church. My point is that you can be baptized in the church, raised in the church, confirmed in the church, serve in the church, marry in the church, die in the church, and have your funeral in the church, and still wake up in hell if you are merely in the church and not in Christ.

This distinction was made most poignantly to me at the funeral of someone I knew very well. He had been baptized and confirmed in the Catholic Church but had not lived a life of repentance or love for Jesus at all. In fact, some of his coworkers showed up at his funeral to, in their own words, make sure he was dead because he had been so despicable. His funeral was held in a Catholic church and officiated by a priest who asked me to say a few words since I was a pastor. I will never forget, standing on the platform waiting to speak, when the priest walked in along with the processional and stood alongside me and declared to the almost entirely non-Christian gathering of friends and family, whom I knew were committing adultery and regularly abusing drugs and alcohol, that they could rest assured that their dead friend and relative was in heaven because he had been baptized as a member of the Catholic Church as a baby, and that if they too were Catholic, God was fine with them.

He then looked at me and said I was free to say a few words, which by God's grace alone did not include expletives. Instead, I briefly presented the gospel as the only assurance for eternal life. Simply, we reject the Catholic definition of the church as unbiblical, unfaithful, and

unhelpful because it falls into the same trap as Judaism, believing that succession and not faith is the entry point into the community of God's people.

However, we do appreciate the Catholic Church's attempt to remain connected with and faithful to the apostles. We would argue, however, that it has wrongly defined how to be apostolically faithful. Paul's point in 2 Timothy isn't the establishment of a line of ordination, but that the men who are constituted leaders are faithful to the apostolic teaching, the faith once for all delivered to the saints.²⁸ Irenaeus, the second-century church father and grandson in the faith of John the apostle, expounds this point well:

The Church having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believed these points [of doctrine] just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed one mouth.²⁹

One theologian summarizes it well: "To claim that the church is apostolic is not to assert a direct line of succession through specific individuals. It is to recognize that the message and the mission of the apostles as mediated through Scripture must be that of the whole church."³⁰

To be faithfully apostolic, a church must remain true to both the biblical message and mission of Jesus. For that and other reasons we are Protestants, which we will now examine.

PROTESTANT

The leaders of the Protestant Reformation rejected the Roman Catholic definition of the church on many grounds. (1) The church and its leaders and sacraments do not function between God and his people in a mediatorial manner, because in Scripture Jesus Christ alone is clearly said to be our only mediator and means of saving grace. First Timothy 2:5 says, "For there is one God, and there is *one mediator* between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (2) There is no evidence anywhere in the New

²⁸Jude 1:3.

²⁹*Against Heresies*, I.10.2.

³⁰R. L. Omandson, "The Church," 233.

Testament that Jesus Christ or his apostles called the church into being with such a rigidly structured institutional hierarchy as purported by Catholicism. (3) There is no evidence anywhere in the New Testament that the apostles appointed bishops. (4) Outside of Scripture the history of the early church flatly denies that it organized itself in the manner described by the Roman Catholic Church.³¹ (5) The entire concept of the Roman Catholic priesthood contradicts the repeated New Testament teaching that in the new covenant there is not a special office of priest but rather a special priesthood.³² As this priesthood, believers have direct access to God the Father through God the Son by God the Spirit,³³ live lives of worship as sacrifices to God,³⁴ hear the confessions of one another's sin,³⁵ and give spiritual guidance and counsel.³⁶ (6) The idea that the appointed leaders and members of the Roman Catholic Church were godly followers and obedient servants of Jesus Christ as the true church on earth simply contradicts even the Roman Catholic Church's historical record, as many leaders were godless men who served out of political and not spiritual motivation.

Augustine became the bishop of Hippo in AD 396 and saw the churches under his jurisdiction divided by heresy and many church members and leaders living unregenerate lives as “the covetous, the defrauders, the robbers, the usurers and the drunkards.”³⁷ As a result, he developed a concept that distinguished between the visible and the invisible church, which later featured very prominently in the Protestant definition of the church during the Reformation.

This distinction is biblical and comes from Jesus Christ himself, who said that not everyone who is a member of the visible church on earth is truly a member of the invisible, historical church bound for heaven. Jesus distinguished between wheat and weeds, and wolves and sheep in the church.³⁸ Even Jesus himself had a non-Christian wolf among his little flock of twelve, Judas Iscariot.

³¹For example, see Edward Schillebeeckx, *Ministry: A Case for Change* (London: SCM, 1981) and *The Church With a Human Face* (London: SCM, 1985); Bernard Cooke, *Ministry to Word and Sacrament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980); and Kenan Osborne, *Priesthood: A History of the Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist, 1988).

³²1 Pet. 2:5–9.

³³Rom. 5:1–2; Eph. 2:18.

³⁴Rom. 12:1.

³⁵James 5:16.

³⁶Col. 3:16.

³⁷Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church?* 190.

³⁸Matt. 7:15; 13:24–30.

The invisible church is the church as God perfectly sees it. The invisible church is the community of all Christians throughout history who have been or will be loved and saved by Jesus Christ,³⁹ including the believing people of the Old Testament.⁴⁰ While it is possible for us to know others who profess faith in Christ (e.g., the Bible often references people as Christian brothers and sisters), ultimately only the Lord knows exactly who is and is not a Christian.⁴¹ In this sense, “invisible church” refers to every person of any age, race, and culture whose sins are forgiven through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

On the topic of the invisible church, theologian Millard Erickson says, “In Ephesians, Paul gives particular emphasis to the universal nature of the church. . . . ‘There is one body’ (4:4). . . . Obviously, the church includes all persons anywhere in the world who are savingly related to Christ. It also includes all who have lived and been part of his body, and all who will live and be part of his body.”⁴² Likewise, Wayne Grudem says, “*The church is the community of all true believers for all time.* This definition understands the church to be made of all those who are truly saved. Paul says, ‘Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up for her’ (Eph. 5:25).”⁴³

The visible church is the church as we imperfectly see it. The various congregations of the universal church that regularly meet together in a particular place at a set time for things such as teaching, fellowship, and worship are commonly called the “local church” or the “visible church.”⁴⁴ Many of the letters in the New Testament were written to help inform and direct the visible, local churches of such cities as Philippi, Corinth, Ephesus, Colossae, and Thessalonica. The local church is visible in that the community sees people who belong to the Lord Jesus gathering as the church for regular meetings, often called church services. Outsiders also see those in the visible church living the life of Jesus as they disperse into the community.⁴⁵

The differences between the visible and invisible church can be seen in Chart 2.1:⁴⁶

³⁹Acts 20:28; Eph. 5:25.

⁴⁰Deut. 4:10; Acts 7:38; Heb. 2:12 cf. Ps. 22:22.

⁴¹2 Tim. 2:19.

⁴²Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1985), 1034.

⁴³Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 853.

⁴⁴For example, see Heb. 10:25.

⁴⁵To examine this further see Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1030–1033.

⁴⁶H. Wayne House, “Local Church Contrasted with the Universal Church” in *Charts of Christian*

CHART 2.1

Visible

Membership: saved and lost
 Only currently living people
 Many local churches
 Differing denominations
 Part of the body of Christ
 Differing types of government
 Ministering the ordinances
 (or sacraments)

Invisible

Membership: saved only
 Both dead and living in Christ
 Only one universal church
 No single denomination
 The entire body of Christ
 Christ is the only head
 Ordinances fulfilled
 (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:23-26; Rev. 19:9)

In local churches there are invariably people who love Jesus out of regenerated hearts—Christians—and people who do not—non-Christians. Therefore, while members of the invisible church do participate in the visible church, the Reformers rightly stressed that not everyone who is a member of the visible church is a member of the invisible church and that many are wrongly assured that they are saved because they are in the church, even though they are not in Christ.

As a result, the Reformers defined the church in terms of the presence of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Perhaps the most famous Protestant definition of the church is from John Calvin, who said, “Wherever we see the Word of God purely preached and heard, and the sacraments administered according to Christ’s institution, there, it is not to be doubted, a church of God exists.”⁴⁷ The same definition with minor alterations appears in many strands of Protestantism, including the Lutheran Augsburg Confession (1530), the Forty-two Articles of the Church of England (1553), and the Belgic Confession of 1561.

According to Calvin and the Reformers, with whom we agree, the church is what happens because God the Holy Spirit works in power through the gospel of Jesus Christ and is not a static institution resting its hopes on apostolic succession. This gospel message of Jesus is to be heard by rightly teaching the Scriptures and rightly guarded with baptism, the Lord’s Supper, regenerated church membership, and ensuing church discipline as needed.

The result of these definitions was that the Protestant church

Theology and Doctrine (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 116.

⁴⁷John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 1023.

was continually reforming itself by the Scriptures, in contrast to the Catholic Church. On this point Mark Dever writes, “At the time of the Reformation the Roman Catholic Church had a Latin phrase that became something of a motto: *semper idem*. It means ‘always the same.’ Well, the Reformed churches, too, had a ‘semper’ motto: *ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda secundum verbum Dei*. ‘The church reformed, always being reformed according to the Word of God.’”⁴⁸

The reforming of the church by the Word of God can be accomplished only by continually returning to the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The great Protestant reformer Martin Luther rightly defined the visible church as a community holding common faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Wayne Grudem writes that the Protestant Reformers, including Calvin and Luther,

said that the Roman Catholic Church had the outward form, the organization, but it was just a shell. Calvin argued that just as Caiaphas (the high priest at the time of Christ) was descended from Aaron but was no true priest, so the Roman Catholic bishops had “descended” from the apostles in a line of succession but they were not true bishops in Christ’s church. Because they had departed from the true preaching of the gospel, their visible organization was not the true church. Calvin said, “This pretense of succession is vain unless their descendants conserve safe and uncorrupted the truth of Christ which they have received at their fathers’ hands, and abide in it. . . . See what value this succession has, unless it also include [*sic*] a true and uninterrupted emulation on the part of the successors!”⁴⁹

Because a right definition of the church is so important for both the being of the church and well-being of its members, Protestants have commonly defined the true church as a breakdown of the Nicene Creed, which says, “We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church.”

“One” church means that ultimately all denominations and traditions are one in Jesus Christ and, while not uniform, are unified. This is because they confess Jesus, live for Jesus, serve Jesus, love Jesus, and follow Jesus according to the gospel by the Spirit. “Holy” church means that because of Jesus his people are set apart, changed, and through

⁴⁸Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2004), 51.

⁴⁹Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 856.

sanctification able to become more and more like Jesus in character through the Holy Spirit. “Catholic” church means that the church is without the limitations of time and space so that the church is made up of people from varying tribes, tongues, races, genders, incomes, educations, generations, times, and places. “Apostolic” church means that it is founded on the teaching and preaching of the apostles as recorded in Scripture. This does not equate to apostolic succession as the Roman Catholic tradition defines it; rather, the true church follows the teaching and life example of the apostles appointed by Jesus to proclaim the gospel in word and deed.

In addition, various Protestant theologians and theological traditions have added to these four marks. Examples include church discipline to preserve the distinction between the church and the world, fellowship between God’s people who love one another, and God’s people on a mission to evangelize lost people and plant churches in the world with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

STREAMS OF THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION

Where Calvinists, Lutherans, and Anglicans formed denominations and understood the church as a large organization of universal or national scope, the sixteenth-century Anabaptists understood the church primarily in terms of its local expression in specific congregations. This understanding was developed by the pietists and the Puritans and came to be known as congregationalism. Today it is the prevailing definition of the church among such groups as Baptists, Pentecostals, Brethren, and independent churches.

Congregationalism, generally speaking, defines following Jesus in seven ways.

1) The church is a community of followers of Christ committed to Christlikeness; it is not a denomination.

2) Every believer is a priest with equal access to God the Father through Jesus Christ and a responsibility to help other believers connect with God.

3) The Scriptures alone are the final authority for faith and practice, and church leaders are to be followed and obeyed only if their life and doctrine agree with Scripture.

4) Local churches are a complete body of believers with Jesus Christ

as their head in ultimate authority and as such are free from external control but are in partnership with likeminded churches for the cause of evangelizing the world.

5) Local churches should make decisions in an essentially democratic way with all church members involved in speaking into and implementing decisions made by the church leadership.

6) Only when individuals are old enough to articulate and demonstrate personal saving faith should they be baptized by total immersion and partake in the Lord's Supper.

7) The local church is separate from the state and neither should control or support the other. The church submits to the state only when it does not contradict the Scriptures, and the church calls the state to righteousness and justice.

The Anabaptist definition of the church continued up to and through the modern era of the enlightenment.

THE MODERN ERA

After René Descartes began his defense of God with the word *I*, one of the great hallmarks of the modern era was its radical commitment to the individual. While not a concept in either the Old or New Testament, the idea that people stand alone as isolated individuals wove its way into the modern era, especially the American consciousness where the rugged individual is the hero in virtually all of our great cultural narratives. As a result, during the modern era the focus shifted from the church to the individual. On this point the historian Mark Noll says, "Up to the early 1700s, British Protestants preached on God's plan for the church. From the mid-1700s, however, evangelicals emphasized God's plans for the individual."⁵⁰

From the declaration by God in the garden to our first parents—that it is not good to be alone—to the example of the one true God who himself exists in Trinitarian community as Father, Son, and Spirit, the emphasis of Scripture is that while we are individuals insofar as there is distinction between us, through the reconciling work of Jesus there should not be division but loving relational community as the church. The Bible is clear that every Christian is a part of the larger church body and is expected to participate in the life of a local church with the

⁵⁰Mark Noll, "Father of Modern Evangelicals?" *Christian History* 38, vol. 12, no. 2 (1993), 44.

gift(s) God has given him or her. This is so God may be glorified and so his people may be built up through their service to one another.⁵¹ It is therefore a sin for someone who claims to be a Christian not to be actively loving his or her Christian brothers and sisters⁵² and seeking to build up the church as faithful members of a church.⁵³

Yet, here we see one of the tragic effects of modernism on church life. Many people who claim to be Christians adopted by God the Father have nothing to do with their brothers and sisters in God's family, the church. Such people will excuse themselves by decrying the hypocrisy of the church while conveniently overlooking their own hypocrisy, or even claiming that all they need is Jesus. In refutation of this modern false teaching, 1 John 1:1–3 says,

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

John's point is that believers stay in relation with other Christians. He goes on to speak of false believers in 2:19: "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us."

Why is it important that believers stay together in the church? Because that is where we love other believers, the mark of the Christian according to Jesus.⁵⁴ John teaches what he learned from Jesus, saying, "By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother."⁵⁵ He also says, "He who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he

⁵¹1 Cor. 12:1–31.

⁵²1 John 1:7; 3:17–18; 4:21.

⁵³1 Cor. 12:7; 14:6, 12, 26b.

⁵⁴John 13:34–35.

⁵⁵1 John 3:10.

has not seen. And *this commandment we have from him: whoever loves God must also love his brother.*⁵⁶

Denying the possibility of isolated individual Christians who have no desire to be in the fellowship of a local church, John Calvin said that every member of the invisible church belongs to the visible church.⁵⁷ If his words are true, then many people are either in sin, or worse still wrongly believe they are saved when they are not. If they were, it would be evidenced in part by their loving their brothers and sisters, which means getting to know them to serve them and learn from them in love.

Building on the modern devotion to the individual, modern Christianity in practice defined the entire purpose of the church in terms of the individual over and above the glory of God and benefit of the community of people. As a result, the modern church in its various forms defined the church as a place where individual spiritual needs are met. What developed was a view of individual Christians as consumers with felt needs and the church as the dispenser of religious goods and services.

Consequently, the gospel came to be seen as—and in many churches still is—a product to be marketed in an attractive manner so as to draw as many customers to the church as possible to consume religious goods and services. Because in this business model the customer is always right, the church tends to sand off any theological edges that consumers find too rough (e.g., sin, God’s wrath, hell). While not denying them, the church hides them so as not to deter or offend the individual customer who is shopping for pop psychology, self-help, and general spirituality.

An entire church-growth industry has arisen to resource this modern, individualistic, consumer definition of church. Furthermore, an entire industry outside of the church has come into existence for people who have forsaken church to instead only read Christian books, listen to Christian radio, watch Christian television, and download Christian vodcasts and podcasts for their personal benefit. While none of these things is bad, they are often abused by modern individual “Christians” with no intent of ever participating in a church or giving to or serving anyone but themselves.

⁵⁶1 John 4:20–21.

⁵⁷Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1021–22.

THE POSTMODERN ERA

The definition of *church* for the postmodern era is still being formulated by those in the broad category of the emerging church, which is not to be confused with the Emergent Village led by Brian McLaren.

In my multiple personal conversations over the past decade with some well-known leaders of the more left-leaning fringe of the emerging church, they have explained that they find their definition of the church more in what we do rather than in what Jesus has done. They talk about how two guys drinking beer are “church” if in their hearts their time at the pub is spiritual. One well-known international missiologist told me that his friends stopped going to church and instead water-ski together every Sunday, and he told them that was fine because being together in the boat was a kingdom activity and therefore qualified as church.

When pressed for any biblical basis for such incredibly thin definitions of the church, Jesus’ words in Matthew 18:19 about where two or more are gathered are commonly quoted. At that point I usually chuckle, because the context is church discipline in which multiple witnesses are to be on hand to verify an alleged unrepentant sin. Their use of this verse is ironic because they themselves are in sin regarding their definition of the church and need to repent or face church discipline—something their buddy at the pub or driver of their water-ski boat simply will not be able to do for the very reason that they are not part of a biblical church.

Some churches have opened Internet campuses. They broadcast their entire church service, including music and preaching, on the Internet. With Internet campus pastors overseeing the digital congregations, individuals log on and watch the service and then participate in prayer and discussion boards online, where they can also give their offering via debit or credit card. But we have to wonder: how can it be a biblical church, looking at a Web site alone at home, unable to partake in the sacraments, or participate in the full-person, relational life of the church? It is too much like a persona in a virtual world, an avatar in Second Life.

In today’s Facebook world, electronic meeting can be a precursor or supplement to an actual gathering, so it seems a reasonable way for seekers to check out a church. The face-to-face interaction in the service and the home groups can be profitably extended in a social networking environment. But those cannot be a substitute for personal gathering if we follow God’s command in Hebrews 10:24–25: “And

let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.” This can be a ministry of a church, but cannot be the fullness of church.

Equally concerning is the proliferation of what are loosely called *emergent* churches. These informal communities often lack any spiritual leader, any clear doctrinal convictions, or any Bible preaching and teaching, but they do have discussions, singing, and the sacraments. They meet everywhere from homes to coffee shops and art studios. Often attracted to these avant-garde, neo-church forms are younger people who were raised in Christian homes but have become disillusioned with their parents’ megachurch or simply bored after years of consuming seemingly every kind of Christian product and ministry experience. Some retain Christian belief while others are more embittered and critical of Christian truth and authority, including the Scriptures. Are such communities actually churches?

After spending five years interviewing participants in the “emergent conversation,” Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger wrote the book *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*.⁵⁸ The book is not from inside the movement; rather, it is an attempt at an objective, outside assessment, and it has been warmly received by many emerging church leaders. Gibbs and Bolger rightly, I believe, do not define many emerging churches by their beliefs (e.g., Trinity, deity of Jesus, cross, resurrection), their view of authority (e.g., parental in the home and pastoral in the church), sacramental practice of baptism and Communion, or practice of church discipline for unrepentant Christian conduct. Rather, they define many emerging churches as those faith communities that share up to nine common practices—three core practices and six derivative practices. At the core, emerging churches are those which (1) take the life of Jesus as a model way to live and (2) transform the secular realm (3) as they live highly communal lives. Derivatively, emerging churches (4) welcome those who are outside, (5) share generously, (6) participate, (7) create, (8) lead without control, and (9) function together in spiritual activities.

In response, none of these things is necessarily bad when practiced

⁵⁸Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolger, *Emerging Churches* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 43–45.

as a missional way of life for a church that meets the biblical criteria. However, if used as a new definition of what the church is rather than what the church does, it is dangerous because of what is missing. Missing is any working definition of gospel regeneration as the starting point for Christian life. Also missing is Jesus as anything more than a really good example of how to live a moral life, which is the classic error of liberal Christianity from a previous generation, a view of Jesus that even the Hindu Gandhi held, believing that Jesus was a great man but in no way God.

The result is that some emerging churches are nothing short of a complete redefinition of what constitutes a Christian church. If widely embraced, the postmodern world could have an entirely new definition of church, one in which church is understood as a community of Christians and non-Christians who live together without distinction, without leadership or discipline or doctrine, trying to emulate the character of Jesus without stressing the gospel requirements of repentance of sin and faith in Jesus that enable the life of Jesus to be lived by the power of the Holy Spirit. At best, we may be on the cusp of a new kind of church for a new kind of Christian. At worst, the proliferation of many small sects and cults under the banner of the emerging church may already be well underway.

What is additionally concerning to me, as someone who loves the church and pastors a church, is that so few Christians seem to care or pay much—if any—attention. Perhaps the incessant focus on best practices and innovation in the name of fruitfulness at the expense of doctrinal rooting has led us to forsake any definition of the church. So long as a few people are doing something spiritual we can call it a church.

My friend D. A. Carson made an interesting observation in a personal conversation we had. He said that one generation believes a truth, the next generation assumes a truth, and the third generation denies a truth. Practically speaking, this means that every Christian family, church, and network or denomination is always a few generations, at most, away from death or heresy. There was a great generation of evangelicalism that, although imperfect, was launched roughly fifty years ago under the leadership of men such as Billy Graham, J. I. Packer, John Stott, and Francis Schaeffer. By God's grace there were many people who believed the truths of the Christian church and its head, Jesus Christ.

The next generation of overly emphasized felt-needs, seeker Christianity sanded off the rough edges of theology such as sin, wrath, the cross, and hell along with what constitutes the church and why the preaching of God's Word and practice of God's sacraments by godly leaders was necessary to keep reminding people of the person and work of Jesus. While the truths of the Christian church were not denied, they were often hidden, because they did not sell well to spiritual consumers.

In short, much of a generation of Christians and their churches assumed a great number of truths and are still reaping the consequences. When traveling to speak in churches like this, I have repeatedly asked pastors if they believe particular essential doctrines, and they have each assured me that they do. When I asked why they stress such things as "steps to a more successful life" rather than their essential beliefs, often they said that they simply assume their people believe them.

Tragically, with the encouragement of the postmodern mood that rejects truth and authority beyond oneself and one's buddies who agree with you, children of seeker churches are now denying truths that their grandparents' generation held dear. Furthermore, the seeker generation is completely oblivious to their children's departure from the core beliefs of the historic Christian church and lack the theological discernment to be anything other than encouraged that so many young people are spiritual and are finding cool new ways to reinvent the church to suit their own felt postmodern needs. Tony Jones, national coordinator of Emergent Village, admits exactly this:

Many of them [Emergents] were nurtured in these seeker-sensitive environments. Some even served on the staffs of these churches. But as the complexities of a globalized world have encroached on their psyches, the emergents have pursued a faith that spurns easy answers. . . . The emergent church movement is a counterreaction.⁵⁹

Protection from these dangers will come by a return to confessing the biblical Jesus as Immanuel, God with us, in word and deed by the fresh preaching of the Word and by Spirit-empowered community on mission to the world for God's glory and their joy, led by godly pastors who passionately follow Jesus.

⁵⁹Tony Jones, *The New Christians: Dispatches from the Emergent Frontier* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), 109.

ANSWERS TO COMMON QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

WHAT IS THE CHURCH NOT?

1) The church is not a building. That's the first definition in any dictionary: "A building for public, especially Christian, worship." Some churches meet in a building and many times that is a home or a multi-purpose building. Some churches around the world also gather under a tree or in a field.

2) The church is not any one denomination. The universal church consists of all people who are connected to the living Lord Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit and have been justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. There are true Christians in the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, and in Anglican, Baptist, Pentecostal, Reformed, and Lutheran churches, to mention only a few. The church is a collection of people from literally hundreds of denominations, networks, and independent churches. There are even occasionally true Christians in heretical groups that falsely claim the name Christian. Conversely, there are people who belong to biblical churches who do not have a relationship with Jesus (Matt. 7:21–29). Only Jesus knows exactly which people are truly his.

3) The church is not a eucharistic society, or a vending machine whereby God hands out grace to those who show up to Mass and partake of the sacraments.

4) The church is not a business. While the church must do business, be organized, and handle money, its mission is quite different from a business. A business exists to deliver goods and services in order to turn a profit. It is driven by the bottom line. In many instances the church is a legal entity recognized by the government but not always, as in the case of the underground church in China and others like it. The church must account for its resources by stewarding them even better than a business

does. Laziness in finance or organization is sin. The church does not exist for profit but for God's glory, which includes good stewardship of its resources.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ISRAEL AND THE CHURCH?

The church is not Israel. Israel is an ethnicity, a nation, and a religious system. The church is none of these. When the Bible—Old and New Testaments—uses the term *Israel*, it always means a group of Jewish people, not the “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9), which is the church.

Some Reformed theologians see Israel as having been replaced by the church so that it is defined as *spiritual* Israel; the church in the new covenant occupies the place that Israel occupied in the old. But that would mean God reneges on his promises to the ethnic children of Abraham (Gen. 12:1–4; Deut. 30:1–5; Isaiah 11; Zech. 10:8–12).

Older, dispensational theologians in the vein of Lewis Sperry Chafer see Israel and the church as essentially two different peoples with whom God works separately throughout eternity. Their defining hermeneutic, which means method of interpretation, is never to blur the distinction between Israel and church. But that negates the statements of God breaking down the dividing wall to form one new humanity (Eph. 2:11–16).

It seems best to say there is one people of God saved by grace alone through faith alone in the promised Messiah alone who are organized in different administering institutions of God's one-kingdom purpose. The physical and spiritual descendants of Abraham—Jewish people and especially Jewish believers—are the “first born” of God's working. With the establishment of the new covenant in Acts 2, the people from every tribe and language and people and nation join in the body of Christ, sharing in the inaugurated promises of the new covenant, but not in the Mosaic religion and national structure of Israel. The Old Testament prophecies of a national restoration of Israel (Ezek. 36:22–38; Acts 1:5–7) will be fulfilled by racially Jewish Christians in the millennium who finally “shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex. 19:5–6).

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE STATE AND THE CHURCH?

The church is not the state. It is neither an instrument of the state nor the ordaining authority for the state's ruler nor an agency to provide moral fiber for the state. In many cases the church has sought to fill these roles, but it has always been at the cost of the mission Jesus gave it.

The relationship between the realms is complex, with a lot of tension. Some, like the so-called Religious Right, want to take back America for Jesus while others, like the Amish, do their best to live completely separate from the state. Many Christians try to ease the tension by oversimplifying the nuanced relationship. For example, some say you must always submit to the government. They quote Peter, who tells believers to "be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors" (1 Pet. 2:13–14), but ignore the fact that Peter also refused the magistrates' command to stop preaching Jesus, saying, "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 4:19–20; 5:29). Others oversimplify by referencing Romans 13:1–8, where Paul tells believers to be subject to governing authorities, but miss the fact that Paul also refused the order of governing magistrates to leave town quietly (Acts 16:36–39).

Believers in Jesus Christ seek the welfare of the city where God has sent them to live (Jer. 29:7), and pray to the Lord on behalf of its rulers (Ezra 6:10; 1 Tim. 2:1–2). They live as good citizens of the state while recognizing that they are first citizens of the heavenly kingdom (Phil. 3:20). As the church proclaims the gospel and seeks to win people to Christ, it proclaims righteousness in the culture by deed and word and exposes its evils in a context of grace.

For further study, the following give a good breadth of Christian thinking on this issue: Stanley Hauerwas, *Resident Aliens* (Abingdon, 1989); John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 1994); Chuck Colson, *God & Government* (Zondervan, 2007); Greg Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation* (Zondervan, 2007); and D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Eerdmans, 2008).

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE CHURCH?

The church is not the kingdom. In recent years many theologians have come to a consensus that the kingdom is to be thought of as the reign

of God and the exercise of his authority. The church, by contrast, is a realm of God, the people who are under his rule. George Eldon Ladd, a leader in forging the consensus, says, “The church is the community of the Kingdom but never the Kingdom itself.”⁶⁰ This consensus is called *inaugurated eschatology*, the idea that the kingdom is both here now in some senses and still to come in its fullness.

Some connect church and kingdom too closely, believing the kingdom is here in its fullness now. This is called an *overrealized eschatology*, which virtually identifies kingdom with church, as many Roman Catholics and some amillennialists do. Others see the kingdom exclusively future, as something Jesus will establish when he returns. This is an *underrealized eschatology*, which disconnects kingdom and church completely, as in older dispensational premillennialism.

God’s kingdom work is the dynamic activity of the sovereign, triune God manifesting his authority in his sin-alienated creation by redeeming it from the domain of evil, judging all enemies, and bestowing the blessings of his reign on and through his people to the praise of his glory. The relation between kingdom and church can be summarized in seven basic points:

1) Jesus, who came as king, inaugurated his kingdom in the new covenant (Acts 2:16–21) and in the church (Acts 2:41–47).

2) Jesus spoke of a coming kingdom (Mark 13; Luke 19:12–27; 21:5–38; Acts 1:6–7).

3) Jesus is now in heaven as anointed king; he will appear as reigning king (Acts 3:20–21; 13:33–41).

4) Believers are faithful members of the present and coming kingdom (John 14:14–16; Rom. 8:19–21; 1 Cor. 7:29–31; Phil. 3:20; 1 Pet. 2:11).

5) The church witnesses to the present and coming kingdom (Acts 1:3–8; 8:12; 19:8; 28:23, 31).

6) Church is an outpost, a parable, a forerunner, the first fruit of the coming kingdom.

7) The church does battle against the kingdom of darkness using the weapons of light (Rom. 13:12; 2 Cor. 6:7; 10:4–5; Eph. 6:10–20; 1 Thess. 5:8).

Practically, this world still has sin, sinners, the devil, and demons but does not yet have Jesus ruling on the earth with a rod of iron (Ps.

⁶⁰George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1993), 109.

2:9; Rev. 2:26; 12:5; 19:15). Subsequently, a naïvely optimistic overrealized eschatology that thinks we can fix all the world's problems and usher in utopia is an extreme error. Conversely, a gloomy, pessimistic underrealized eschatology that thinks we can't make a difference in the world as the church by the power of the gospel is also an extreme error. This tension of the kingdom being already present in the church but not yet fully unveiled until the return of Jesus allows us to labor in hope until he returns by working on both the spiritual and physical needs of people, caring for the whole person including their food, water, shelter, education, and clothing.