

Church

By Bernard Gabbott

We go to church. We are part of a church. We see the church. We are the church. We sing at church. We pray at church. We read the Bible at church. We invite people to church.

But, what is 'church'? Who is 'church'? Why do we have/do/be 'church'? What do we do at 'church'?

'Church' is a word we use often, a concept we love and which we agree with... but how do you define it, and what does it mean for our lives as God's people?

Over the next five weeks, we will spend some time looking at five questions:

- What is church?
- Who builds the church?
- Who makes up the church?
- What is the purpose of church?
- What do we do at church?

Study 1: What is church?

1. How would you answer this question, and why is that your answer?

‘What is church’?

2. Read these two passages, and answer the questions... the concept ‘church’ is underlined:

Deuteronomy 4:10-14

¹⁰ The day you stood before the LORD your God at Horeb, the LORD said to me, ‘Assemble the people before Me, and I will let them hear My words, so that they may learn to fear Me all the days they live on the earth and may instruct their children.’ ¹¹ You came near and stood at the base of the mountain, a mountain blazing with fire into the heavens and enveloped in a dense, black cloud. ¹² Then the LORD spoke to you from the fire. You kept hearing the sound of the words, but didn’t see a form; there was only a voice.

¹³ He declared His covenant to you. He commanded you to follow the Ten Commandments, which He wrote on two stone tablets. ¹⁴ At that time the LORD commanded me to teach you statutes and ordinances for you to follow in the land you are about to cross into and possess.

(cf. Exodus 19 for the original account)

Hebrews 12:18-24

¹⁸ For you have not come to what could be touched, to a blazing fire, to darkness, gloom, and storm, ¹⁹ to the blast of a trumpet, and the sound of words. (Those who heard it begged that not another word be spoken to them, ²⁰ for they could not bear what was commanded: And if even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned! ²¹ And the appearance was so terrifying that Moses said, I am terrified and trembling.) ²² Instead, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God (the heavenly Jerusalem), to myriads of angels in festive gathering, ²³ to the assembly of the firstborn whose names have been written in heaven, to God who is the judge of all, to the spirits of righteous people made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus (mediator of a new covenant), and to the sprinkled blood, which says better things than the *blood* of Abel.

- Who is 'assembled' in both accounts?
- Where are they 'assembled'?
- What tense is used in each description? What is striking about this?
- What is different between the two descriptions? Why? What significance does this have?

3. Focus in a little more on the Hebrews reading...

- What occasion of church is it describing? What is striking, then, about the tense?
- How might this affect the way we view church?

4. How do these two passages work as bookends for what we understand church to be now?

5. Look back at your answer to question 1...

- What might you change? Why?
- How might this affect other parts of the Christian life?

Study 2: Who builds the church?

1. How would you answer this question, and why is that your answer?

'Who builds the church'?

2. Reading Genesis 3, Psalm 5:4-6 and Psalm 51:1-4, what is the key issue that stands at the heart of church taking place?
3. Look at the passages below, and answer the questions:

Matthew 16:13-20

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"
¹⁴ And they said, "Some say John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ "But you," He asked them, "who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God!" ¹⁷ And Jesus responded, "Simon son of Jonah, you are blessed because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the forces of Hades will not overpower it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth is already bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth is already loosed in heaven." ²⁰ And He gave the disciples orders to tell no one that He was the Messiah.

Hebrews 12:18-24

¹⁸ For you have not come to what could be touched, to a blazing fire, to darkness, gloom, and storm, ¹⁹ to the blast of a trumpet, and the sound of words. (Those who heard it begged that not another word be spoken to them, ²⁰ for they could not bear what was commanded: And if even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned! ²¹ And the appearance was so terrifying that Moses said, I am terrified and trembling.) ²² Instead, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God (the heavenly Jerusalem), to myriads of angels in festive gathering, ²³ to the assembly of the firstborn whose names have been written in heaven, to God who is the judge of all, to the spirits of righteous people made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus (mediator of a new covenant),

and to the sprinkled blood, which says better things than the *blood* of Abel.

1 Timothy 2:5-6

⁵ For there is one God and one mediator between God and man, a man, Christ Jesus, ⁶ who gave Himself-- a ransom for all, a testimony at the proper time.

- Who is Jesus, and what does he do?
- How does Jesus 'build' the church?
- What lies at the heart of Jesus building the church?

4. Look at the passage below, and answer the questions:

Ephesians 2:17-22

¹⁷ When *Christ* came, He proclaimed the good news of peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. ¹⁸ For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father. ¹⁹ So then you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with the saints, and members of God's household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus Himself as the cornerstone. ²¹ The whole building is being fitted together in Him and is growing into a holy sanctuary in the Lord, ²² in whom you also are being built together for God's dwelling in the Spirit.

- What kind of builder is Jesus?
- What does he continue to do, and how?
- How does verse 20 interact with Matthew 16:18; 28:18-19, and 1 Peter 1:23-25?

5. Looking back to your answer in question 1, what might you change, adjust...?

6. What is the key means by which Jesus builds the church, and continues to build the church?

What effect might this have on how we 'do' church?

Study 3: Who makes up the church?

1. Thinking back to our last study, what was the key issue that needed resolution for creating the church? Why is this an issue?

2. Read the passage below and write down all the descriptors of those who make up the church (cf. Col.1:8; Rom.8:29; Heb.10:14; Acts 20:28; Col.1:20)

Hebrews 12:22-24

²² Instead, you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God (the heavenly Jerusalem), to myriads of angels in festive gathering, ²³ to the assembly of the firstborn whose names have been written in heaven, to God who is the judge of all, to the spirits of righteous people made perfect, ²⁴ to Jesus (mediator of a new covenant), and to the sprinkled blood, which says better things than the *blood* of Abel.

4. Read the passage below and write down the transformation that enables sinners to be the church:

Ephesians 2:1-10

And you were dead in your trespasses and sins ² in which you previously walked according to this worldly age, according to the ruler of the atmospheric domain, the spirit now working in the disobedient. ³ We too all previously lived among them in our fleshly desires, carrying out the inclinations of our flesh and thoughts, and by nature we were children under wrath, as the others were also. ⁴ But God, who is abundant in mercy, because of His great love that He had for us, ⁵ made us alive with the Messiah even though we were dead in trespasses. By grace you are saved! ⁶ He also raised us up with Him and seated us with Him in the heavens, in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the coming ages He might display the immeasurable riches of His grace in *His* kindness to us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you are saved through faith, and this is not from your-

selves; it is God's gift-- ⁹ not from works, so that no one can boast. ¹⁰ For we are His creation-- created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time so that we should walk in them.

5. If sinners make up the church, how do you identify them? Look at the following passages and write something down:

Romans 10:8-9

This is the message of faith that we proclaim: ⁹ if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

Colossians 2:6-7

⁶ Therefore as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, walk in Him, ⁷ rooted and built up in Him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.

John 15:9-12

⁹ "As the Father has loved me, I have also loved you. Remain in My love. ¹⁰ If you keep My commands you will remain in My love, just as I have kept My Father's commands and remain in His love. ¹¹ "I have spoken these things to you so that My joy may be in you and your joy may be complete. ¹² This is My command: love one another as I have loved you.

1 John 2:1-3

My little children, I am writing you these things so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father-- Jesus Christ the righteous One. ² He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not only for ours, but also for those of the whole world. ³ This is how we are sure that we have come to know Him: by keeping His commands.

6. What will the church be a mix of now? Why?
7. What is always the foundation for church 'membership'?

Study 4: What is the purpose of church?

1. Write down what you think the purpose of church is, and why?
2. Read the following passage and write down what this eternal church is doing:

Revelation 21:1-4

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea existed no longer. ² I also saw the Holy City, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband. ³ Then I heard a loud voice from the throne: Look! God's dwelling is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will exist no longer; grief, crying, and pain will exist no longer, because the previous things have passed away.

Does this surprise you? Why/Why not?

3. What has God's plan always been?

Ephesians 1:3-6

³ Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens, in Christ; ⁴ for He chose us in Him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in His sight. In love ⁵ He predestined us to be adopted through Jesus Christ for Himself, according to His favor and will, ⁶ to the praise of His glorious grace that He favored us with in the Beloved.

4. If God's purpose has always been to gather a people for himself, and the image of that is God 'hanging out' with his people for all time, how would you define the purpose of church?
5. Here are some statements to consider:

- 'Church is an end in itself, not a means to an end'
- 'Non-Christians are not part of the church'
- 'Church is the climax of history'

6. Look back at your answer to question 1—what has/has not changed over the course of this study?

Study 5: What do we do in church?

1. Write down what you understand (and why) as the necessary features of church, as it gathers for fellowship...
2. What do we do every day as someone who is part of God's people?

Romans 12:1-2

Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.

1 Corinthians 10:31

³¹ Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for God's glory.

3. What is the key principle for what happens when church gathers?

1 Corinthians 14:26

²⁶ How is it then, brothers? Whenever you come together, each one has a psalm, a teaching, a revelation, *another* language, or an interpretation. All things must be done for edification.

4. What do the following passages suggest should be part of church?

Ephesians 4:11-16

¹¹ And He personally gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, ¹² for the training of the saints in the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ, ¹³ until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of God's Son, *growing* into a mature

man with a stature measured by Christ's fullness. ¹⁴ Then we will no longer be little children, tossed by the waves and blown around by every wind of teaching, by human cunning with cleverness in the techniques of deceit. ¹⁵ But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into Him who is the head - Christ. ¹⁶ From Him the whole body, fitted and knit together by every supporting ligament, promotes the growth of the body for building up itself in love by the proper working of each individual part.

Luke 22:14-20

¹⁴ When the hour came, He reclined at the table, and the apostles with Him. ¹⁵ Then He said to them, "I have fervently desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. ¹⁶ For I tell you, I will not eat it again until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." ¹⁷ Then He took a cup, and after giving thanks, He said, "Take this and share it among yourselves. ¹⁸ For I tell you, from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes." ¹⁹ And He took bread, gave thanks, broke it, gave it to them, and said, "This is My body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of Me." ²⁰ In the same way He also took the cup after supper and said, "This cup is the new covenant *established by My blood*; it is shed for you..." (cf. 1 Cor.11:20)

Ephesians 5:18-21

¹⁸ And don't get drunk with wine, which *leads to* reckless actions, but be filled with the Spirit: ¹⁹ speaking to one another in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing and making music to the Lord in your heart, ²⁰ giving thanks always for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ submitting to one another in the fear of Christ.

Colossians 3:16-17

¹⁶ Let the message about the Messiah dwell richly among you, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, and singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, with gratitude in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or in deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.

Colossians 4:2

² Devote yourselves to prayer; stay alert in it with thanksgiving.

1 Corinthians 14:27-33

²⁷ If any person speaks in *another* language, there should be only two, or at the most three, each in turn, and someone must interpret. ²⁸ But if there is no interpreter, that person should keep silent in the church and speak to himself and to God. ²⁹ Two or three prophets should speak, and the others should evaluate. ³⁰ But if something has been revealed to another person sitting there, the first prophet should be silent. ³¹ For you can all prophesy one by one, so that everyone may learn and everyone may be encouraged. ³² And the prophets' spirits are under the control of the prophets, ³³ since God is not a God of disorder but of peace.

1 Corinthians 13:1-8

If I speak the languages of men and of angels, but do not have love, I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal. ² If I have *the gift of* prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so that I can move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³ And if I donate all my goods to feed the poor, and if I give my body to be burned, but do not have love, I gain nothing. ⁴ Love is patient; love is kind. Love does not envy; is not boastful; is not conceited; ⁵ does not act improperly; is not selfish; is not provoked; does not keep a record of wrongs; ⁶ finds no joy in unrighteousness, but rejoices in the truth; ⁷ bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. ⁸ Love never ends.

Hebrews 10:24-25

²⁴ And let us be concerned about one another in order to promote love and good works, ²⁵ not staying away from our meetings, as some habitually do, but encouraging each other, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.

5. Look back at your answer to question 1—is there any difference or similarity to what you have just learned...?
6. Given all that we have learned, who should be entrusted with serving in these various areas of church? Why?