

the ESSENTIALS



WHAT ALL CHRISTIANS BELIEVE AND WHY IT MATTERS

Part 9: I believe in the Church | Pastor Joe Wittwer | March 15, 2009

A. Fellowship Time (10-15 minutes)

1. Chitchat. Perhaps offer coffee, tea, or a cold drink with some snacks.
2. Pray (or invite someone to pray) to open the discussion.

B. Review Time (Read the summary below to the group: 5-10 minutes)

Many people today say yes to God, but no to church. “I believe in God, but I want nothing to do with the church.” Or, “I’m against organized religion.” The Apostles’ Creed says, “I believe in God,” and then it says, “and in the holy catholic church.” Wow! The creed puts believing in the church right up there with believing in God. Why? Is it really that important?

1. What is the Church?

The Greek word for “church” is *ekklesia*, the “called out ones.” It was the word for a public assembly. In **Matthew 16:18** Jesus tells Peter, “*And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.*” Jesus says that the church is built on a rock. What is that rock—Peter (whose name means *rock*), or what Peter had just proclaimed in **Matthew 16:16**: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”? Paul states in **1 Corinthians 3:11**, “*For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.*” And in **Ephesians 2:20** he refers to the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus being the chief cornerstone. So the church is built on the rock of Jesus Christ, and on the teaching of the apostles about Him. Jesus also teaches in Matthew 16:18 that the church belongs to Him, He will build His church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

So the church is people who are called to follow Jesus, who gather together for worship, teaching, fellowship and mission. [Read **Acts 2:42-47** together.] Church is not a building or a place; it’s people. The church is beautiful and awful at the same time, because the church is people: imperfect people, sinful people, stubborn people, selfish people. Thus, there are no perfect churches. The church is simply people who are called to follow Jesus together. We don’t do it perfectly; sometimes we don’t even do it well. But that’s what we’re trying to do, and we can only do it together.

2. Why is the church important?

The answer is found in our definition: the church is people who are called to follow Jesus, who meet together for worship, teaching, fellowship and mission. Here are three common images of the church: We are brothers and sisters in the family of God. We are members of the body of Christ. We are living stones in the temple of the Holy Spirit. Each addresses one of the purposes of the church and together they reveal the Trinity. Here’s another example of the Trinity penetrating every part of Christian theology:

- **God has a big family: fellowship.** The church is a family: God is our father, and we are all brothers and sisters. [Read **Galatians 3:26-28** together.] Jesus taught us to pray not just “my father” but “our Father.” The church as a family meets our need for fellowship, community, and relationship. Being a Christian is about believing, but it’s also about belonging. The church is God’s big family—enjoy the family! Enjoy the fellowship.
- **Jesus has a working body: growth and mission.** As Paul describes in **1 Corinthians 12**, the church is the body of Christ. Jesus is the head, and each of us is an individual member or part of the body. The church has both diversity and unity: it is one body made up of many different parts. The church grows as each part does its work. The church as a body illustrates the purposes of growth and mission. The church grows as each part does its work, uses its gifts. The only way each individual part can grow is as it is connected to the rest of the body.

- **The Holy Spirit has a living temple: worship.** The church is a temple, and we are the living stones. (1 Corinthians 3:11, 16-17; Ephesians 2:19-22 and 1 Peter 2:4-5 all use this metaphor. Read Ephesians 2:19-22 and 1 Peter 2:4-5 together.) We are being built together into a temple of the Holy Spirit. The temple serves as a place of worship. Worship has always been one of the church's guiding purposes. And we need this temple built of *us together* for worship in all its fullness. We love God best together.

3. What should you do with the Church?

Let's finish with some very practical suggestions about the church: **Don't just go, belong.** You go to a movie; you belong to a family. Church is more like family than a movie. **Don't just watch, participate.** You'll get so much more out of it by participating, really entering in. You can go to the gym and watch people work out, but you won't get in shape until you participate. In the same way, you can go to church and watch people worship and fellowship, but you won't grow until you participate. **Don't just consume, contribute.** At some point, you've got to be a giver, not just a taker. Roll up your sleeves and help out. Serve somewhere. This church becomes your church when you make a contribution. **Don't just quit, try to work it out.** We're a family. Sometimes families fight. Sometimes they're dysfunctional and weird. But stick with it and try to work things out, because too much is at stake to just quit.

C. Life Group Questions (select, revise, and add as desired: 20-40 minutes)

1. Jesus only used the term "church" twice, so how He used it is important. Read **Matthew 16:16-18**. Jesus is honoring Peter by playing off his name. How and why is He honoring Him, and what's the rock that the church is still build upon today? (See Scriptures above.)
2. The second place Jesus talks about church is in Matthew 18:17. Read **Matthew 18:15-17** together. What does Jesus say about the kind of community the church is to be? What's required to create such a community? What principles in this passage help keep confrontations loving in spirit and approach? How did Jesus treat pagans and tax collectors?
3. What is our proper response to the fact that the church is full of sinners (including ourselves)? If we're all parts of the body of Christ, how does our very condition create an environment where God can teach us love, acceptance, and forgiveness? What are examples from your own experience as part of the church?
4. We see profound things about the nature of the early church in **Mark 1:14-18** and **Acts 2:42-47**. Read these passages together and discuss what you see about the formation of the early church. How do we and can we go about following their example today?
5. Why aren't worship, teaching, fellowship and mission as effective alone as in a group? How does our time together as a group help equip the "church" (us as people) for living God's mission in our everyday lives—how does this time together make us more like Jesus?
6. We regularly *gather* for worship, teaching and fellowship and then *scatter* to fulfill a mission within the world. What is that mission, and what kind of skills do we have that contribute to accomplishing it? Whom do we need?

D. Personal Application (1-3 Minutes)

- Remember as you review the Creed this week in your devotions that "catholic" in this context means *universal*. Journal about ways your local church experiences throughout life have connected you to the universal church that's around the world and across history.
- What specific actions do you need to take this week in the areas of *belonging, participating, contributing* and/or *reconciling* in the church?

E. Prayer Time (As a whole group or subgroups of 3-4: 10-15 Minutes)

- Thank God for sending Christ to lay the foundation for the church. Thank God for the church today, in all cultures and corners of the world, we have brothers and sisters. Pray for our brothers and sisters who face persecution or difficulty in being together.
- Pray for guidance on your role in "the holy catholic church," and at Life Center specifically.
- Bring any other praises and requests before the Lord that arose during your discussion.

The Apostles' Creed

I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord:

Who was conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried.

He descended into hell. The third day He arose again from the dead.

He ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God the Father Almighty,
whence He shall come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,

the holy catholic church, the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting. Amen.

For further reading on Christian doctrine:

- *The Faith: What Christians Believe, Why They Believe it, and Why it Matters*, Charles Colson and Harold Fickett, Zondervan, 2008.
- *Christian Basics: An Invitation to Discipleship*, John Stott, Baker, 1991.
- *Basic Christianity*, John Stott, InterVarsity Press.
- *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, N. T. Wright, Harper, 2006.
- *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis, Macmillan, 1952.
- *Christian Theology in Plain Language*, Bruce Shelley, Word, 1985

For further reading on the Apostles' Creed:

- *The Apostles' Creed*, William Barclay, Knox, 1998.
- *I Believe: Exploring the Apostles Creed*, Alister McGrath, Intervarsity Press, 1997.
- *Affirming the Apostles' Creed*, J. I. Packer, Crossway, 2008.
- *Credo: Believing in Something to Die For*, Ray Pritchard, 2005.