

What Is the Church?

I deeply love the one, universal, and apostolic Church.

My love isn't for the Church's institutions as we sometimes find them, weakened by compromise, fragmented by pride, or hollowed out by their slow drift from the Lord. My love is for the Church as the people of God, gathered from every nation and generation, united to Christ by the Holy Spirit, and called to live as a foretaste of the age to come. She is the community that first gave us the Word. The community that showed us what repentance looks like, what forgiveness costs, and what love can bear. The community that carried the gospel through fire and plague and the collapse of empires, and which still carries it today.

After more than 15 years in ministry, both in the States and abroad, I've seen both the best and worst of the Church. I've seen her in contexts that would undo most people's faith in her: divided, spiteful, politicized, self-serving, and theologically gutted. But I've also seen her at her best, where the sacrifices of her love have been great, where her courage is steadfast, and where her faith moves mountains. These encounters have clarified and focused my love for the Church. She is not an institution that we build and maintain, but a people whom Christ is building and whom the gates of Hades cannot overcome.

Yet my soul is greatly troubled because our generation is losing Christ's glorious vision for the Church and replacing it with something that cannot bear the eternal weight of glory that he bestowed upon his Church. The vision that is emerging in our generation is so benign that it doesn't threaten the powers of this age. In fact, they often find it useful to their cause. This vision is comfortable but not compelling. Even mature and faithful Christians are being lulled into complacency by this comfortably benign vision. Meanwhile, our lived experiences and felt identities are being hallowed out as our love for one another grows colder and colder and our fight to resist the temptations of this world grows weaker and weaker.

So we must have a clear vision of the Church that sees what Christ is doing in the world and understands what it means for us to be caught up in his work. This vision of the community, Kingdom, and mission of the Church is where we receive a real sense of the eternal weight of glory that rests upon us as God's people.

Community: A Body, Not a Crowd

The Church is not an audience. She's not a demographic. She's not a constituency, a vendor, or a spiritual service provider. She is a body — *"one body with many members"* (Romans 12:4-5) — organically united, mutually dependent, and growing together under one head. Paul is relentless on this point because it cuts against every natural human tendency toward isolation and competition. *"Now you are the body of Christ,"* he writes, *"and individual members of it"* (1 Corinthians 12:27). The Church is not a program or a model. We are not even people merely existing "alongside" or "among" one another. No — we are a people who exist "of" one another. Take a moment to consider John 17:22-23.

This isn't a metaphor for cooperative programming. It's a description of ontological reality. Those who belong to Christ are joined to one another in him, fitted and held together by every supporting ligament, growing and building itself up in love as each part does its work (Ephesians 4:16). The gifts distributed through the body — apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers — are not professional roles, but are Christ's provision for his Church, given so that the saints might be equipped, the body built up, and the whole community growing

“into maturity with a stature measured by Christ’s fullness” (Ephesians 4:13). The Church was meant to be measured by “Christ’s fullness!”

This is why the earliest Christians *“devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayer”* (Acts 2:42). These were not four programs on a Sunday menu. They were the life-rhythms of a people being formed together. They sold possessions, ate together, shared what they had with whoever had need, and worshiped with glad and sincere hearts. They weren’t worried about “maintaining” or even “growing” the Church because *“the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved”* (Acts 2:44–47). The community was a witness. And her life was a visible argument for the gospel she proclaimed.

This vision is seen wherever people have gathered around Christ, being formed by his Word, and nourished at his table. We see it in something as simple as when bread is broken and passed. We see it when one member brings their job loss, their frightening diagnosis, or their tormenting internal battle before their community, who steps up to love and carry them in their moment of need. We see it when the word preached grips the conscience and produces repentance or decisive Kingdom action in the people of God. We see it where the prayers of the saints effect mighty change and deliverance. This vision of the life of Christ being lived out among his people is what has compelled the Church to enact God’s order on earth even in the face of overwhelming tribulation.

The Church is also a household. We are *“members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone”* (Ephesians 2:19–20). This household is a temple where God dwells. The Church is not a monument but a living structure, being built up into a “spiritual house” and a holy dwelling place for the Spirit, made of “living stones” (1 Peter 2:4–5). And each one of the “living stones” is placed by God and indispensable.

So, “community” is not a church program, but part of the Church’s identity, which is lived out every day in how we think about and treat each other, in what we individually pursue in life, and in what our gathering looks like and pursues as a whole. A Church is constituted by mutual belonging, mutual accountability, and mutual service, with each member being genuinely known, genuinely needed, and genuinely responsible to the others.

Kingdom: Citizens of Another Country

The community of the Church exists, not for its own sake, but in service of something much larger than itself: a present kingdom that is still emerging, being both present in the world and not yet fully revealed, which knows no borders, and cannot be measured by elections or institutions or the fortunes of nations. *“Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness”* (Matthew 6:33) is Jesus’ command that comes before everything else.

Jesus’ Kingdom parables describe a kingdom that operates by foreign logic to every earthly power. It starts small — hidden like leaven, buried like a seed — and its growth is imperceptible until it isn’t. It is worth everything. It cannot be built by coercion or captured by coalition. It is not of this world (John 18:36). *“The kingdom of God is not coming with something observable”* (Luke 17:20). The Kingdom of God does not arise with political power, cultural influence, or military force. Quite simply, the Kingdom of God arises from within and transforms the world from the center out.

Paul describes the nature of this kingdom plainly: “*the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit*” (Romans 14:17). The Kingdom is seen in the life of its people. It’s not a culture war, or a flag, or a party, or a nation. It’s the reign of God already breaking into the present age through the life of a transformed people, as it’s written that God has “*rescued us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of the Son he loves*” (Colossians 1:13–14).

The reality of God’s Kingdom among his people is why the living Church cannot lose her prophetic voice among the nations. She must enact God’s order on earth and witness the powers of the age to come to this perishing world. But a church captive to this world’s powers cannot speak truthfully to it about the coming of God’s Kingdom, nor can she resist its demands for compromise. A captive Church trades her birthright for a bowl of political stew.

So the Church is a kingdom community — a royal priesthood, a holy nation (1 Peter 2:9). We are the outpost of a different order. This is important. We are citizens of a kingdom that will itself break in pieces and bring to an end all earthly kingdoms (Daniel 2:44). That kingdom has already been inaugurated in the resurrection of Jesus, who now reigns at the right hand of the Father, and who has made us “*a kingdom, priests to his God and Father*” (Revelation 1:6). The kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God (Revelation 11:15). The day is coming. So the Church must enact God’s order on earth now!

Mission: Sent, Not Settled

A community formed by the kingdom of God cannot be inwardly directed. She is sent. The risen Christ does not merely commission us from a distance: “*As the Father has sent me, I also send you*” (John 20:21). Jesus’ Kingdom commission is total in scope: all authority, all nations, all that Christ commanded, all the days until the end of the age. This isn’t merely a suggestion for the missionally gifted. It’s the marching order of our Kingdom community. It encompasses proclamation (Mark 16:15), witness (Acts 1:8), reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18–20), and the formation of disciples who enact God’s Kingdom order on earth by obeying everything Christ commanded. The Church is not merely the custodian of a message. She is the messenger.

And she is sent to a world that is perishing. We were called to go into a world ravaged by hate and bring love. We were called to go into a war-torn world and make peace. We were called to go into a sick world and bring healing. And, most importantly, we were called to go into a world that is hostile to God and bring reconciliation! We have been anointed by the Spirit of God to “*preach good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor*” (Luke 4:18–19). This is why we “*are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his possession, so that you may proclaim the praises of the one who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light*” (1 Peter 2:9).

What does that sending look like in practice? It looks like the faith of a woman in her workplace that courageously refuses to engage in financial corruption and forces her coworkers to ask why she was able to risk everything for her faith. It looks like a man who puts away the pursuit of money and success in favor of raising his children in the Lord. It looks like a family whose table is crowded with people who have nowhere else to go. It looks like ordinary people who have been so genuinely changed by the love of God that they are, simply by the way they live, a disruption to the order of a world organized around self. This is not heroism. It is obedience. And it is available to everyone who belongs to Christ.

Isaiah's response to the voice of God still defines the posture of a sent Church: "Here I am. Send me" (Isaiah 6:8). Not: "Here we are, maintaining our programs." Not: "Here we are, defending our cultural position." Here I am. Send me. The question the Church must ask of herself in every generation is not whether she is well-resourced, well-attended, or well-regarded by her surrounding culture. The question is whether she is going.

What's at Stake?

The Church at her best is all at once "community," "Kingdom," and "mission." She is a community genuinely formed in the life of Christ, enacting in very real terms God's Kingdom order on earth, being sent with the news that this kingdom is open to everyone who will receive it. The Church is the most dangerous force in the world, not because she fights for dominance, but because she embodies an alternative to every order that dominance creates. But the Church can become benign. We can lose our saltiness. We can hide our light. We can succumb to institutional pressure, political captivity, and theological thinning. In short, we can lose the eternal weight of glory that abides on the Holy dwelling place of God and become just one among many other worldly institutions. We have seen it happen. And it is happening right now.

But we also know that Christ is still building his Church. We know that the Spirit has not been withdrawn. We know that the same Lord who dictated those letters to Ephesus and Pergamum and Laodicea is still calling his people to hear what the Spirit says to the churches. The renewal of the Church is not our project. It is his. But it will take place, as it always has, through broken and ordinary people who decide that passivity is no longer an option. When the people of God decide that something more is required, and that they are willing to pay the cost of it, then the gates of hell begin to shake!

The Call

This is what we are being built into by the Lord. Not an audience. Not a religious service with acceptable production values. Not a gathering of like-minded people who have found a comfortable theological niche. We are being made into a community that takes seriously the claim that Christ is risen and reigning, that his kingdom has come and is coming, and that we have been sent to bear witness to it with our words and our lives. We are being built into something that is worth the cost of being the Kingdom of God on earth!

We want to be clear: this is not a new vision. It is the oldest vision there is. Christians in every generation who have refused to let the Church settle for less have looked like this — gathered around the Word, loyal to a kingdom not of this world, and sent in the pattern of Christ's own self-giving. We are not trying to be novel. We are trying to be faithful.

This is not for everyone, and we say that without apology. Jesus himself acknowledged that the road to life is narrow and few find it (Matthew 7:14). But it is for anyone willing to lay down the comforts of a Christianity that costs nothing and take up the cross of a discipleship that means something. The kingdom of God is at hand. The harvest is plentiful. The laborers are few.

If you have longed for something more than what you've been given — a community that actually knows you, a faith that actually shapes you, a mission that actually sends you — then the question is not whether you find this vision compelling. The question is what you are going to do about it. We are not asking you to admire this. We are asking you to *come belong*.