

WEEK 6: WHAT DOES THE CHURCH HAVE TO OFFER?

Opening Questions:

- What has your experience with the church been like?
- Have you been disappointed by the church or people within the church? Anyone willing to share?
- What have been some objections to the church that you have heard?
- What is the best thing you have seen the church (a local congregation, body of believers, members or leaders of a church community) do?
- Are you plugged into a local church?

Let's give some definitions:

Church (sometimes used with a capital C) refers to the Church universal (also referred to as 'the church')—the church across time and space, so all people in Christ since humanity began.

Whereas, *church* (sometimes used with lower case c) can refer to a local church congregation or church building.

The term *church*, in the New Testament sense (with or without a capital C), is the body of believers in Jesus Christ. The church is not a building, it is not a particular denomination or tradition within Christianity, but the entire body of believers in Jesus Christ. That is how we will use *church* here.

Listen to how N.T. Wright summarizes what the church is:

The church is the single, multiethnic family promised by the creator God to Abraham. It was brought into being through Israel's Messiah, Jesus; it was energized by God's Spirit; and it was called to bring the transformative news of God's rescuing justice to the whole creation.¹

The church's mission is to be the community bearing witness to the rest of the world of who God is and who God calls human beings to be in their lives, actions, and words.

Throughout history, the church has both been faithful in keeping to its God-given mission, and at other times has failed to be the true humanity God has called it to be.

¹ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian*, 200.

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The Universal Declaration of Human Rights that is a founding document for the United Nations declaring the inherent worth of every human being is derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition that teaches every human being is an image-bearer of God and therefore has inherent dignity. The global south, where the church is now booming in growth and vibrancy came about through missionary efforts of the western church. The civil rights movement of the mid-20th century in the US was born, sustained, and led by African American churches. The dismantling of apartheid in South Africa and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that sought to bring healing to a divided country was led by the church in South Africa.

However, acceptance of nationalist values that dehumanized others which led to World War II and the killing of millions of Jews, took place without loud protests by the German church (apart from the Confessing Church).² The Bible was used by white settler Christians in North America to justify and defend chattel slavery of black and brown people. The Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa (a relative of the Christian Reformed Church in North America) was an agent of establishing the racist rule of apartheid in South Africa.³

Perhaps the church has rejected you or a loved one because of bias against LGBTQ+ folks. Or you have experienced some church people to just be unkind—they're not pleasant people—you know kinder people who profess no faith.

Remember, the church is not a building—it is people, so the church is indeed made up of biased, prejudiced, fearful, sinful people. Those people are also being redeemed by the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit—meaning, the Spirit is making them more and more like Jesus. It is by that community that God is showing the world who he is and that the world is God's.⁴ The church is the people charged with embodying to the world who Jesus is. The church has and will at times get it wrong, sometimes terribly wrong, as the spool of history unwinds.

² Leonore Siegele-Wenschewitz, "Christians against Nazis: the German Confessing Church," <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-9/christians-against-nazis-german-confessing-church.html>

³ Susan Rennie Ritner, "The Dutch Reformed Church and Apartheid," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 2, No. 4, Church and Politics (Oct. 1967), pp.17-37.

⁴ Matthew 28:19-20

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However, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the church has and will also get it right because the church belongs to Jesus, the Spirit guides it. Jesus will not let the church be destroyed because Jesus loves the church as a groom loves his bride.⁵ So before we take pleasure at going on and on about how badly the church has messed up, remember that Jesus loves the church and grieves when the church does not reflect him faithfully. If you are a believer, you are a part of the church, too, whether you like it or not.

God is not a God of throwing away things, but of making good but broken things new again. The church exists, in its broken but redeemed state, for the purpose of proclaiming in word and deed and life that Jesus Christ is king, Jesus is Lord.⁶ It is the power of Jesus and his good news that changes people, changes the world.

Whenever the church causes you dismay by its action or inaction, look again to Jesus⁷—he is the one we are trying to imperfectly reflect.

*The church's one foundation
Is Jesus Christ her Lord
She is his new creation
By water and the word
From heaven he came and sought her
To be his holy bride
With his own blood he bought her
And for her life he died.
-The Church's One Foundation (hymn)*

Closing Question:

If you are a believer, how does being a part of the body of Christ shape your life?

⁵ Revelation 19:6-8, Ephesians 5:25-27

⁶ Wright, 204.

⁷ Read the gospels: Matthew, Mark, Luke

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Resources Used:

Leonore Siegele-Wenschewitz, "Christians against Nazis: the German Confessing Church," *Christianity Today*, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/issues/issue-9/christians-against-nazis-german-confessing-church.html>.

N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*, HarperCollins Publishers, 2006.

Susan Rennie Ritner, "The Dutch Reformed Church and Apartheid," *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 2, No. 4, Church and Politics (Oct. 1967), pp.17-37, JSTOR.