

GATEWAY CHURCH NORTHUMBERLAND

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What is the Church? – Joss Bray

This is vital to understand as much as we can because it informs all we do and all we are together. What the church is for is another talk for later, but as we see what it is – then we start to get a feeling for what it was designed for. For a start, we know that it is not a physical building – you can't leave your umbrella in church for example. So what is it?

The Church is God's plan

EPH 3:10 His intent was that now, through the church, the manifold wisdom of God should be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly realms, ¹¹ according to his eternal purpose which he accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord

And therefore he put Jesus in charge of it:

EPH 1:22 And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.

Then Jesus said "I will build my church":

MT 16:15 "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ 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.

If something is to be built - it is something that is planned and designed, it needs resources i.e. building materials, builders and direction.

It needs to be built on a strong foundation and built to withstand whatever comes against it. The foundation of the church is that Jesus is "The Christ, the son of the living God" as Peter said.

But we also help with the building – by the grace of God. Remember – that grace is the unmerited favour of God – His undeserved blessing and equipping to do everything he has called us to do. One of those things is to help build the church.

^{1CO 3:10} By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. ¹¹ For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, ¹³ his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light.

And remember – it's not in our strength, or with our plans:

^{PS 127:1} Unless the LORD builds the house, its builders labor in vain.

The foundation of the revelation that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God, has been revealed to the apostles and prophets who heard from God.

^{EPH 2:19} Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. ²¹ In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. ²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

That is the foundation that apostles and prophets lay for the church – and that is still needed now when new churches start.

In summary then:

Clearly, Jesus is very keen on the church – and it is really important.

Things to note so far:

The church is God's plan to impact the world – to bring the good news of the Kingdom of God. That is his only plan – there is no Plan B.

The church belongs to Jesus and he is the head of it.

The church deserves the best we can do – by the grace of God.

Christians should be together as church – this is the “normal” Christian state.

We have a new community and identity as part of the church -

We see that once we were outside – now we are inside – once excluded – now included.

And God lives in us by his Holy Spirit.

Size doesn't matter – churches were of many sizes in the New Testament.

So what actually is the church? We all have different experiences of different churches – but what should all churches have in common?

There are several pictures that illustrate what church is and the one closest to the building analogy is this:

Living stones

¹PE 2:4 As you come to him, the living Stone--rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him-- ⁵ you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house

So this picture helps us to move from the idea of church as a physical building to a different sort of building – a spiritual house.

The building blocks aren't bricks but people. Different shapes and sizes maybe but built together – to stay together. The house is built on a solid foundation as we have read.

But what then, keeps the living stones together? The cement of love for each other – that is what's needed to cover over the rough edges and stick us to each other.

The Body of Christ

¹CO 12:27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

Here the picture is of a body – and note, each one is a part.

And Christ is the head:

^{COL 1:18} And he is the head of the body, the church;

In a body, each part is needed although different. The parts are firmly joined to each other and cannot do without each other. One part cannot look down on another. The parts look after each other and function together.

The Bride of Christ

This is a bit more difficult to understand

John the Baptist points the way to the idea that the Church is like a bride and Jesus is the bridegroom:

JN 3:27 To this John replied, "A man can receive only what is given him from heaven. ²⁸ You yourselves can testify that I said, 'I am not the Christ but am sent ahead of him.' ²⁹ The bride belongs to the bridegroom. The friend who attends the bridegroom waits and listens for him, and is full of joy when he hears the bridegroom's voice. That joy is mine, and it is now complete. ³⁰ He must become greater; I must become less.

John may be the best man, but the church belongs to Jesus.

Paul also talks about Christ and the church in terms of marriage:

EPH 5:25 Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her ²⁶ to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, ²⁷ and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. ²⁸ In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. ²⁹ After all, no one ever hated his own body, but he feeds and cares for it, just as Christ does the church-- ³⁰ for we are members of his body. ³¹ "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." ³² This is a profound mystery--but I am talking about Christ and the church.

Even Paul says it is a “profound mystery” – and it gets more mysterious in Revelation – the final act before the rest of eternity, is a picture of a wedding between Jesus and his bride:

REV 19:7 Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready.

Even more confusing is that the bride turns out to be a city!

REV 21:1 Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God 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 every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."

So at that point, the fulfilment of the church – when all things are made new – is that the church becomes a city where Christians will live and be with God for ever. In this picture, the church is shown to be what it will be when it is made perfect as in Ephesians 5v25. This points to the ideal, perfect church. However – this will not happen until the end times!

The best church ever!

So the good news is that we will be able to be “in” church 24/7 and for ever! Isn’t that something to look forward to!

It will be a place where we are always safe, and well, and full of joy. God will be right there with us all the time. There will be no more pain or sadness or death, no rejection or darkness, no fear or anxiety. We will be united in worshipping and enjoying God for ever. There will be nothing to detract from the beauty and awesomeness of God’s provision for us.

That is the picture of the perfect church - we may be not quite there yet – but we know where we are going.