

What is a church?
TEXT: Acts 4:32-35

PHBF 2.10.13
Scr. Reading: Acts 4:32-35
The Church, Its Members, and Their Pastors

What, would you say, is a church? How would you define it? How is it related to Jesus? The message of the gospel? Christianity as a system of thought? Christendom as a worldwide community? Christian believers individually? Christian organizations like camps (Elim), mission agencies (YWAM), campus groups (Crusade)? The larger, secular world of culture, business, and politics?

What place does church have in your self-concept? Your sense of a meaningful life? Your use of your own resources—time, money, ability? Your goals and prayers for your kids and grandkids? Your priorities as an individual or a family? **[A leading priority, central place]**

What does the church have to do with what we are doing right now—attending this meeting, listening to this sermon? What does the church have to do with your life Monday-Saturday? With your personal relationship with Jesus? With your Christian growth? With your hope to make it to heaven? With your ability to cope with life? **[Everything!]**

Specifically, a church is a group of people who are

- United in Christ spiritually
- Committed to one another personally
- Focused on spreading the gospel missionally

We'll see that each of these qualities produces a particular effect that makes the church distinct and precious. Also, at PHBF each of these is reflected in a key publication or statement unique to our church.

UNITED SPIRITUALLY (v 32a)

Acts 4:32 *Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul...*

Notice the radical degrees here: “the *full* number [NIV: “all”] were of *one* heart and soul.” Keep in mind, this church has 10,000+ members (cf 4:4). In spite of that huge size, where we might assume it could be hard to feel connected, every single person was united in one heart and soul.

How? Ephesians 2 explains the powerful spiritual reality that brings the diverse members of a church together as one:

Ephesians 2:20-22 *[you are]...²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone,²¹ in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.²² In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.*

The figure of the temple dominates the OT—the building that housed Israel’s God, literally bringing Him right into their midst. He was their God and they were His people. The NT does not abandon the figure of the temple, nor does it forsake the goal of God dwelling in the midst of His people. What the NT does with that image is intensify and radically personalize it. The church is now the place where God is housed, and He quite literally dwells in the midst of His people who are living stones in the house He inhabits.

If you are a member of this church, you are one in heart and soul with the rest of these people. Whether you believe it or not, feel it or not, experience it or not, we are a building where God dwells by His Spirit.

Our SoF. There are other realities that unite us spiritually—the basic essentials of our belief, which we have spelled out in our Statement of Faith. We don’t all have the same interests, political views, or religious heritage. But we do have this in common. We are united in accepting these basic truths about the world.

[distribute SoF] Notice that most articles begin “We believe IN...” rather than “We believe THAT...” These statements are acknowledgements, not assertions. We are admitting what truly is, more than asserting what we think in our minds.

A church is united spiritually—“one heart and soul.” We are God’s temple, united in affirming these essential truths.

The result? **Harmony.**

COMMITTED PERSONALLY (vv 32b, 34-35)

Acts 4:32-35 ³² ...no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common... ³⁴ There was not a needy person among them, for as many as were owners of lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold ³⁵ and laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need.

A church has that essential spiritual connection, but its members share something much more: commitment to each other's complete wellbeing. Why? Churches are intended by God to be outposts of His kingdom, where Jesus reigns and His people flourish in body, soul, and spirit. A church that doesn't care for its members' physical needs is not living up to its calling.

This is what separates a church from Christians gathered for a conference or a week at camp. This is also what distinguishes church membership from church attendance: expressed responsibility for one another's wellbeing. (more about this next week)

These early Christians were so devoted to one another, those with financial means literally shared their wealth with those in need. In our quick-credit, debt-inflated, self-centered culture, just about all we know is a lust for more possessions; but these people were actually *selling* possessions to care for others.

Now we should be clear on what is NOT happening here. This is not a mandatory form of Christian communism. Couple evidences:

1. Verse 34 says "there was not a needy person among them" rather than "not a wealthy person." In other words, those with means did not necessarily divest themselves of all their money so that they were all equally well off.
2. Peter's comments to Ananias in 5:4 indicate that this practice was voluntary.

I conclude then that verse 32 describes their *attitude* toward each other and their possessions: "no one said his things were his own"; verses 34-5 describe their *actions*—when need arose, the church banded together to meet it.

"Church" is not a building where we meet: "Let's redecorate the church." It is not even a meeting we attend: "I really enjoyed church today." It's something we ARE. The NT uses the metaphor of a "body": **1 Corinthians 12:20-27** ²⁰ Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. ²¹ The eye can never say to the hand, "I don't need you." The head can't say to the feet, "I don't need you." ²² In fact, some parts of the body that seem weakest and least important are actually the most necessary. ²³ And the parts we regard as less honorable are those we clothe with the greatest care. So we carefully protect those parts that should not be seen, ²⁴ while the more honorable parts do not require this special care. So God has put the body together such that extra honor and care are given to those parts that have less dignity. ²⁵ This makes for harmony among the members, so that all the members care for each other. ²⁶ If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it, and if one part is honored, all the parts are glad. ²⁷ All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it.

Our church covenant—the expressed commitments we avow re: how we will live before God and with one another in this church. (we'll read it together next week)

Result: Security. At Parker Hills, we take seriously our responsibility to watch out for each other and care for each other spiritually, relationally, and physically. We do everything humanly possible to make sure our members prosper and their life is blessed.

FOCUSED MISSIONALLY (v 33)

Acts 4:33 And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all.

What motivated them to maintain unity spiritually and care for one another personally? They knew their community existed for a higher purpose than just the community itself. They were together for the gospel, not just for the sake of community. They knew that their purpose was to advance the fame of Jesus' name and the domain of His kingdom on the earth.

The church is the manifestation of the living God in this world. It is a

display of His glory. It is the gospel made visible. (all of these ways of putting it are from Mark Dever) A church without this outward looking vision is less than a church.

The profound unity in this church came about, not by being unity conscious, but by being Christ conscious, gospel conscious, mission conscious. It's about looking away from our longing for unity and our need for community and instead mobilizing for mission.

Our church mission statement: "Jesus Christ: to know Him and make Him known for the glory of God and the joy of all peoples."

Result: Priority

What is a church?

- United spiritually, producing harmony
- Committed personally, fostering security
- Focused missionally, maintaining priority

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