



Christ & the Church

How did your church begin? What caused your particular congregation to come into being?

To answer this question, you might be inclined to study a history book. If you are a member of the Presbyterian Church of Eastern Australia, you might pull "*The Bush Still Burns*" out from your library, reading the section focusing on the history of individual PCEA congregations.

You certainly would be able to glean helpful information from such a book. It is a blessing to be able to learn some of the historical details that illustrate how God has worked in the specific context that we are a part of, reflecting on how He made our congregations into the churches that they are today.

But no matter which church we happen to be a part of, there is a fundamental truth crucial to understanding how that church came about. If we belong to a faithful, true church, anywhere or any-when, we need to know this truth in order to understand why that church exists.

That truth is a person: Jesus Christ. Without Him, no church would exist, plain and simple.

Gathered by Christ

The church is gathered by Christ. He is the one who takes the church out of the world. The church is a community called out of the entire human race, called out to be separate, called out to be unique, called out to be distinct. Jesus Christ, the head of the church, is the one who does the calling.

How does He do this? What means does He use to gather His people to Himself? His Word and Spirit. He works in the hearts of those who belong to Him by the power of the Holy Spirit. He enables His beloved people to know, accept, and believe the truths of His Word. His Word, empowered by the Spirit, becomes a mighty instrument by which Christ enables His beloved people to trust Him and be joined to Him. As a fisherman uses a net to draw fish to himself, so Christ uses His Word and Spirit to draw the church to Himself.

Protected by Christ

In addition to Christ the head of the church gathering the church, He also protects and preserves the church. He defends the church from her enemies. He watches over the church to see that none who truly belong to that church will ever be able to ultimately fall away.

With Christ as her head, no one who is truly a member of the church is ever in danger of being stolen away. What a source of immeasurable comfort: to know that the church of Jesus Christ will remain strong because Christ her Lord has infinite strength to protect her!

How does Christ protect and preserve His church? Once again, by means of His Word and Spirit. Without the truth of God's Word, the church would have nothing with which to defend herself against the attacks of the devil, the world, and our own sinful nature. We would be like an army without guns, like an astronaut without a spacesuit, like a kayaker without a paddle, being pushed through the rapids of life with nothing to help steer us and guide us.

Of course, the Word would have no power to defend us were it not for the Holy Spirit. We need both Word and Spirit if we are to endure. Thankfully, Christ provides both for His church.

Existing for Christ

Why does Christ our head gather, protect, and preserve His church? For Himself.

In other words, the church exists for Christ. The church exists to serve Christ. The church exists to give praise to Christ.

This is crucial for understanding the purpose of the church. Some people think the church exists to serve the poor of the world. Certainly, the church does serve the poor, but not first for the sake of the poor. We do so out of obedience to the one who has called us to serve the poor, that He alone might receive all praise and glory.

Some people think the church exists to serve the spiritual needs of her members. Again, the church does serve the spiritual needs of her members. But this is a side effect of advancing the glory and honor of her Lord and Master.

Some think the church exists to evangelize. Of course, the church must evangelize. But she does so to witness to the glory of the one who has called her out and loved her.

Whatever else we think about the work and purpose of the church, it has been formed for Him, for Jesus Christ.

Chosen for Christ

Christ gathers the church. But who exactly is it that He is gathering in?

Ultimately, the church is made up of those who have been chosen to belong to Him. In other words, the church is the body of the elect.

Christ has been forming for Himself a temple. He has known since eternity each and every brick in that temple. This is by no means a temple which he is building as he goes along. "Well, look at that, another brick has decided that He would like to be a part of this temple. I guess I could add him in over there. Oh good, there's another one. I really to fill in that empty hole over there." Sheer and utter nonsense.

Really, trying to leave the formation of the church in human hands, dependent on the human will, totally misinterprets what the church is all about. And it totally takes away from the beauty of the church as a body which God himself has been in the process of forming.

This is what any thinking that denies the truth of election really does. Anything that leaves salvation in the hands of humans, any thinking which denies that God's people have been predestined to be brought into the body of Christ, denies the beauty of the body of Christ.

Instead of having a beautiful temple meticulously formed and crafted throughout history, you have a misshapen monstrosity, the final look of which is dependent on the will of sinful human beings. As if the church could ever be what it was meant to be left in our hands! How foolish. And how sinful. How blasphemous it is to say that the church forms itself by means of individual humans making the decision that they themselves will choose to believe.

Belonging to Christ?

So the church is the body of the elect. Does this mean that every institution here on earth which calls itself church is therefore a group of elect people?

Not necessarily. For one thing, not every organization which calls itself church is, in actuality, a church. Some groups of people calling themselves church are not really churches at all. They are false churches.

There may very well be some people in those false churches who are true Christians, who are elect. But on the whole, the false church is disobedient. True believers should get out of such a false church and join a true church where the Word is believed and practiced.

What about true churches? Is everyone who is a member of such a church elect?

Not necessarily. The one church as God knows her, the one body of Christ, is made up strictly of the elect. But unfortunately, when we see the body of Christ made manifest in visible true churches, it has to be said that there may very well be hypocrites and unbelievers in her midst.

This is the inevitable result of living in a sinful world. There will be some who seem to be in the church as we see it, but who are who are not really a part of the church which Christ died for. They are not really believers. They are not really a part of the universal church that belongs to Jesus.

Sometimes it will be obvious in what they say and in what they do that they are not really believers. Should they continue to remain in their unbelief, refusing to repent, such people should not be allowed to remain in the church. After all, the church is the body of believers. It is the community of those who show that they are chosen for eternal life by their faith in Christ. Ultimately, the church is not a place for unbelievers.

This is not to say that a true church puts up signs saying: "No unbelievers are allowed to attend our worship services." We want them there, so they can hear the Word preached and be confronted by the call of the gospel. But they can only become members of the church when they repent and believe.

Known by Christ?

Some people are good at hiding the fact that they don't really believe in Jesus Christ. They say the right things. They seem to do the right things. But in their hearts, they ultimately reject God and His truth.

God knows they are not really a part of the church. But we don't. Such people must be treated as brothers and sisters, since they give every appearance of being a brother or a sister. But, should they fail to repent of their unbelieving heart, God will ultimately say to them, "I never knew you."

Mind you, the believer does not have to worry about whether or not he really is a part of the church, whether or not he really is elect. If you are truly sorry for your sins, if you look to Jesus Christ to be your Lord and Savior, if it is your desire to lead a godly life, you can confess with the writers of the Heidelberg Catechism, "*of this community I am and always will be a living member.*" I am truly a part of the community chosen for eternal life. You can know and believe this.

This does not mean you are going to be perfect. This does not mean you are not going to struggle. This does not mean that you will never know times of doubt. But it does mean that ultimately, you can put your trust in God, knowing that He is the one who has made you a part of His church and He is the one who will keep you in His church. Thanks be to God who gathers, protects and preserves His church.

One in Christ

What must also be stressed is that the church is one church. There is one body.

It is certainly the case that here on earth, we will see different churches forming different denominations. Sometimes it will be a matter of true churches having separated from false churches. Sadly though, there will also be times when human sin brings about division among churches, each of which is more or less pure.

But nevertheless, we can know that in the eyes of God, the body of the elect is not in essence divided, but it is one body united in one faith, having one Spirit, serving one Lord. This is essential to remember about the church.

Of course, the perfect expression of that oneness awaits eternal life. Then, there will be nothing to stand in the way of the oneness.

But knowing that at that point we will all be one should not stop us from seeking to express that oneness here and now. In fact, we are commanded to do what we can to express that oneness.

Does this mean we should all join one world-wide super denomination? No, not really. But we should seek to express oneness whenever we can. We can help believers around the world with our offerings. We can meet with representatives from true churches around the world to discuss matters of mutual concern, such as doctrinal matters, or matters relating to our fight against sin in the world. We can also express this unity by praying for brothers and sisters around the world, especially those brothers and sisters in areas where persecution abounds.

There is so much we can do and must do. We are one church, joined in one Saviour, who has declared, *"There shall be one flock and one shepherd."*

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