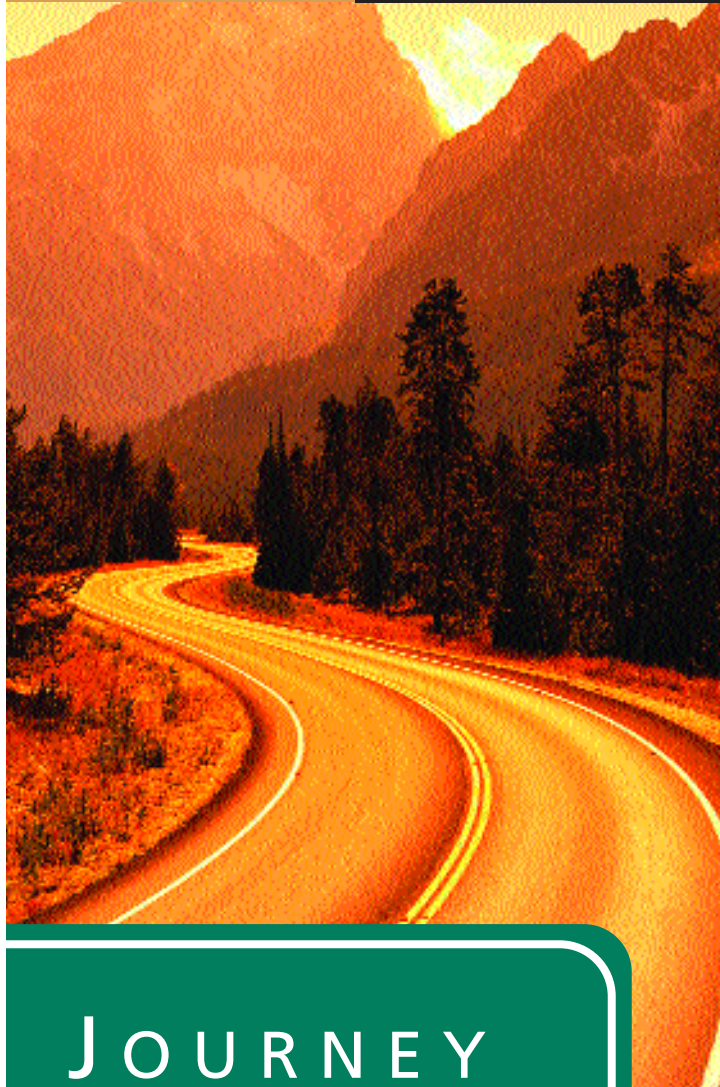


volume 7



JOURNEY
TO FAITH

The Body
of Christ

THE BODY OF CHRIST... THE CHURCH

Around the world, on any given Sunday, millions of people gather together in churches. Some of these churches are architectural and historical wonders. Their grand spires dramatically pierce the sky; their design and grandeur dwarf the surrounding landscape. From great cathedrals in Europe, to small huts in villages in rural countries, to living rooms, storefronts, schools and even in secret hiding places for fear of discovery—people gather together for church. Why?

It is not an obvious answer. Years ago, church was a part of the very fabric of North America. Most attended, or at least attached themselves to some organized church in some way.

Yet today, the culture has changed, and church does not command the same loyalty it once did. Perhaps it is because many have not grown up attending church. Or perhaps their earliest memories of church were negative.

That may be your background. You found church totally irrelevant, boring and a waste of a good weekend. Or maybe you've never darkened the door of a church. Maybe your family background is of a particular denomination, though you never attend.

As a man named John Erskine once said, "Most people have some sort of religion—at least they know what church they're staying away from."

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Most North Americans, when asked what a church is, think of a building or a religious organization. Many seem to visualize a church somewhat like a club—just with a religious slant. For many, the church is nothing more than a group of *people who join some kind of club* to defend morality, virtue and the idea of God.

The religious club building seems to have a rather distinct style with a cross somewhere, some stained glass windows and some religious figures hanging about. The club members usually tend toward the more serious side, displaying very little frivolity. The religious club includes

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group singing of spiritual songs (called hymns). The club's bylaws are usually connected to the group charter (known as the Bible).

People sit silently (and some not so silently) and listen to a speech (called a sermon or homily), then sing a few more

songs, give their weekly dues (called offerings) and then head for home.

To many, that basically sums up church—just another human organization to join, one more institution vying for our time, attention and resources.

Why would anyone want to go to church? Surveys tell us that in America alone over 100 million people go to church regularly.

Is the church really what we think it is? Is the church really what *you* think it is? Who came up with this idea of church, anyway? Is the church merely an attempt to organize people into some common purpose around shared moral values and religious convictions?

There are any number of clubs or service groups to accommodate common human values and goals. But the church is far more than that.

Chuck Colson, the founder of Prison Fellowship, writes, “The church is an organism, not an organization—a movement, not a monument. It is not a part of the community; it is a whole new community. It is not an orderly gathering; it is a new order with new values, often in sharp conflict with the values of the surrounding society” (Chuck Colson, *The Body*).

The Bible teaches that the church is actually one large body, the living body of Christ upon the earth. When people become Christians by trusting in Jesus to save them—to give them eternal life and forgive them of their sins—the Holy Spirit, the apostle Paul teaches, places them in the church.

The church is described in the New Testament as a body, the body of Christ. This body is not a building or an organization. It is the living representation of Jesus. He lives through his church—those believers living on the earth—wherever they may be.

This universal body is composed of believers not only of this age, but all those Christians of the past, and all those who will live in the future. They constitute one large family—the family of God. Some of these believers are children, others are senior citizens. They come from every race, tongue, tribe and place.

Whether the church is in Indonesia or Japan, Germany or Russia, Africa or North America, the desert or the mountains—regardless of the languages or cultures—Christians are part of this body. The church includes believers who are part of many different denominations. Though it may look and sound differently in different parts of the world, those who have trusted in Jesus alone for their salvation are part of his body.

WHOSE IDEA WAS THE CHURCH?

Is the body of Christ just another human political invention? The Bible teaches differently. When Jesus walked the earth, he spoke of creating the church. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus was speaking to his disciples, particularly Peter, when

he said, “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.”

On the day of Pentecost, a few weeks after the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, believers who had been waiting for the coming of the promised Holy Spirit suddenly experienced his arrival (Acts 1:5, 2:2).

With great signs and wonders, the church was inaugurated. A loose collection of individuals was suddenly, miraculously knit together into one marvelous body by the divine act of God. A brand new family had been born, a new society had been created.

There had been no vote, there was no building, there were no by-laws, no stained glass windows, no steeples, no choirs, no one even took an offering! But the universal body of Christ had miraculously begun.

Later, the apostle Paul made it clear that the body of Christ, a metaphor for the church, had begun at that historic moment when God joined all the believers together in what he called the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The birth of the church was God’s idea. It wasn’t started by a group of religious leaders trying to exert control over their adherents.

Explaining this brand new community, Paul described how the church is one body, with the same characteristics of human bodies.

“The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ. For we were all baptized by one Spirit into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, slave or free—and we were all given the one Spirit to drink” (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

When a person becomes a Christian, they are placed into the body of Christ on earth, not by church policy, or group vote, or by how much they donated to the building fund—but by an act of the Holy Spirit.

They are born into this family and become a vital and necessary part of the body, the

church. The church encompasses all believers in Christ.

C.S. Lewis became a Christian after many years as an atheist, and then an agnostic. He was turned off by the churches around him, like so many are today. “When I first became a Christian,” he writes, “I thought that I could do it on my own by retiring to my room and reading theology, and I wouldn’t go to the churches and their gospel halls.... I disliked very much their hymns, which I considered to be fifth-rate poems set to sixth-rate music. But as I went on I saw the great merit of it. I came up against different people of quite different outlooks and different education, and then gradually my conceit just began peeling off. I realized that the hymns (which were just sixth rate music) were, nevertheless, being sung with devotion and benefit by an old saint in elastic-side boots in the opposite pew, and then you realize you aren’t fit to clean those boots. It gets you out of your solitary conceit” (C.S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics, Answers to Questions on Christianity*).

The body of Christ was God’s idea, not man’s! God calls humans to his church and places them within it. The church is not a club which we join—the church is a divine community to which we are called and invited.

Meeting certain requirements or performing specific rites and rituals do not obligate God to give us membership in the universal body of Christ. Merely attending church services does not make one a Christian.

As Billy Sunday, an evangelist of an earlier

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generation in America once said, “Going to church doesn’t make you a Christian any more than going to a garage makes you an automobile.” We are placed in the universal body of Christ when we place our trust in Jesus as our Savior and surrender our lives to him.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE CHURCH?

Why did God create his church? Some have the idea that the church is a place where Christians gather together and put up walls in an attempt to keep the world out. Occasionally, they venture out far enough to make some judgment upon society, then dash back to the safety and cover of their church fortress.

And it is true. There are many who attempt to “do” church this way. Their concept of church is a “holiness club” whose membership standards and requirements insist upon near-perfect behavior by its individual members. Yet God’s purpose for the church is much different.

The church isn’t a sacred holding tank for Christians until their death. It is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints. It is in the church that Christians begin to discover more about the God who has saved them and loved them, and about the Bible which is God’s written testimony of his desires and plans for man. It is here that they begin to learn how to love one another and how to forgive one another, as Christ has loved and forgiven them.

Yet the physical incorporations called churches are filled with people who do not perfectly represent the teachings and ideals of Jesus. Within any two groups of people you may encounter, it is possible to find more agreeable people who are outside the group than inside!

In churches all around the world you will find examples of moral failures, blatant hypocrisy, selfish conceit, anger, unbridled ambition and more. There is no denying this. There is no need to.

It should be expected that in a hospital you

will find people at all levels of health, some still suffering horribly from that which caused them to enter the hospital, and others much further along in their recovery. What many people forget is that the church is not a stage where perfect Christianity is displayed. Rather, it is a place where people are being slowly transformed from what they once were, into what God wants to make of them. This transformation takes time.

The New Testament is frank and honest about the failures and shortcomings of New Testament Christians and their churches. Yet, it never records a church that doesn’t work, even though it faithfully records their frailties, weaknesses and frequent mistakes.

WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE CAN I EXPECT TO FIND IN CHURCH?

Ironically, the imperfect church is the perfect place for Christians to learn the lessons of love. It is only when we commit ourselves to being a part of this awkward, sometimes messy, painful institution called the universal body of Christ, that God begins to shape and mold us into what he wants us to be.

Those who commit themselves to the universal body of Christ learn to forgive and become kinder, more compassionate and more patient. Imperfect people, like ourselves, actually help us learn to forgive, be patient, and to reflect God’s love that lives within us.

Maybe you have experienced hypocrisy from a Christian you know, or have witnessed hypocrisy in a church first hand. The truth is that there are hypocrites everywhere. You will look in vain for a group or club or organization that is free of hypocrites and hypocrisy.

And, there are people attending parts of the universal body of Christ who are not yet Christians. They are seekers—listening, asking, not yet sure of what choice they will ultimately make. And, there are people who attend church services regularly who may never be a Chris-

tian.

CAN I BE A CHRISTIAN WITHOUT GOING TO CHURCH?

Maybe you have wondered if you can be a Christian without attending a church. The answer is yes. It is not church attendance that makes someone a Christian, but placing their trust in Jesus, and his work on the cross.

You can be a Christian without attending a church, but you are still a part of the body of Christ. All Christians, regardless of how, when and where they reflect the new life that Jesus lives within them, are part of the universal body of Christ.

The church isn't a sacred holding tank for Christians until their death. It is a hospital for sinners, not a museum for saints.

Each Christian in the body has a unique service to bring to the church as a whole. Each Christian is a part of the body. This means that God has uniquely designed each believer to help the church body grow in

some way.

There are no “second string” Christians, those who just warm the bench while others do the important work. God has given each Christian some special and unique ability or gift of service to be useful to the whole body.

WHICH CHURCH IS THE REAL CHURCH?

With such a dizzying array of churches to choose from, it can be difficult for people to know which church to attend, if any. Maybe you have been intimidated by the idea that you might end up in the “wrong” church.

Some groups that call themselves a “church” are not genuine Christian churches, leading to even more confusion. Some cult groups use the word “church” in their name to attract the unwitting. Some Christian churches

have doctrinal error and cultic characteristics. There are healthy, unhealthy and even toxic churches.

How then can you know what kind of church to attend? First of all, remember that there is no “perfect” church, so you aren’t looking for “the only true” church. Many genuine Christians have chosen to associate with other Christians who share their own worship tastes, cultural distinctives and ministry interests.

As a result you can find genuine disciples of Jesus in liturgical churches, as well as less traditional churches. Some churches are parts of large denominations, others are independent churches, not associated with any denomination.

Maybe your family has a tradition of being a part of a particular denomination or church movement. The true church is composed of Christian people in a wide variety of groups, but no physically incorporated entity exclusively represents God here on earth. The style and peculiar doctrinal distinctives of a particular group or denomination are not what constitute God’s church.

There are several common denominators of a genuine Christian church—wherever it meets, and whatever it is called.

- The first common denominator is a strong belief in the Bible as God’s authoritative Word, and the guide for our daily living.

Whether the church is formal or informal, one sign of a healthy church is if God’s Word, the Bible, is at the heart of the teaching and ministry of the church.

- As a result of the belief in God’s authoritative Word, a true church of Jesus Christ teaches and affirms that he is truly God, the perfect God/Man (Colossians 2:9, John 1:1, 14).

This is where many cults and heresies will part ways with the universal body of Christ. Those who deny that Jesus is fully God and fully man are not part of the real body of Christ. Belief in Christ’s deity is essential to understand the importance of his death and resurrection,

and ultimately our salvation.

If Jesus is not God, his death was merely a martyrdom, not an eternally perfect sacrifice for all time for our sins. If Jesus is not God, he could not have been raised from the dead. If Jesus is not God, his words are not authoritative, and he is just one among many religious teachers in this world.

A true denomination or congregation of the universal body of Christ teaches that Jesus is perfect God and perfect man.

- A healthy, biblically sound and Christ-centered group will also affirm the Triune nature of God. Virtually every cult that claims to be Christian departs from the biblical description of God's nature. The Trinity is thus a watershed issue, separating authentic Christianity from counterfeits.

- A true church will also believe and affirm that a person is saved by grace through faith. It is not by being good, or doing good works, or being “religious” that a person is granted forgiveness for sins and eternal life. Ephesians 2 verses 8 and 9 make it clear that “by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.”

Though God certainly wants us to engage in good works, those good works do not save us. The good works of the body of Christ are performed not to appease God, but in gratitude for what he has already done for us.

Doing good deeds does not make someone a Christian—God miraculously delivers Christians into his church by spiritual re-birth. Spiritual re-birth is by grace alone. God's amazing grace is the central message of the true church.

- A true church will be Christ-centered. The focus of a true Christian church will be Jesus Christ. He will be the center of the church, for he is the head of the body (Colossians 1:18).

Using the metaphor of the body, the church consists of the individual members of the body,

but Jesus is the head of the body. He provides the direction, the wisdom, the power and the resources.

After you are miraculously re-born by God's grace into the universal body of Christ, if you wish to become part of a local church, you may need to attend several different churches before you find one with which you can feel most comfortable.

Some people are drawn to formal liturgical churches, while others are drawn to less traditional churches. You may feel more comfortable in a larger church, while someone else might be more drawn to a smaller church.

The important thing is that you don't expect the local, humanly incorporated and organized church—a n y church—to be perfect. If the church honors Christ, and teaches his Word clearly, you can find fellowship with others.

You may be a part of a church right now, but for a variety of reasons, you may need to “change your spiritual address.” In spite of what some churches may tell you, God will not be mad at you if you decide you need to move to a healthier church. And, there may be perfectly sound, biblically based reasons why you decide not to be a part of any church for a period of time.

You may have had some horrible experiences in or with a group that called itself a church, and you may need some time while the Great Physician heals you.

Remember, you don't become a member of the true church—a member of Christ's body—by signing up or by attending. To enter the kingdom of heaven, Jesus taught, we must be “born again” (John 3:3).

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The true church is not entered by a physical door, or by attending membership classes, but by a spiritual re-birth where God joins you to his body, the church. This is why, sadly, there are people in churches who are not genuine Christians. They have gone through all the external human stipulations for membership in a church, but they have yet to be truly born again.

The true church is not entered by a physical door, or by attending membership classes, but by a spiritual re-birth where God joins you to his body, the church.

For many centuries there was only one physical and outward way to be formally involved with the work of God's church on earth. There was only one church "corporation" for almost 1,000 years—then a split occurred between

Christians in the West and those in the East.

Then, following the Protestant Reformation, the church of Jesus Christ mushroomed and grew. Still, national churches within countries remained the sole option for a believer.

When Christianity moved to North America, many varieties of Christianity thrived within the multi-cultural freedoms offered by democracy. However, this same fertile spiritual soil has also given birth to many cults and counterfeits of Christianity.

In addition to many biblically sound and Christ-centered churches available today (as distinct from cults) there are many para-church ministries that specialize in fulfilling a particular role and ministering to specific needs within the body of Christ.

It is thus now possible to have fellowship with one or more organized churches as well as several para-church ministries. And for those who have had regrettable experiences with church groups—help, comfort and spiritual nurturing are available without the formal affiliation

that may not be desired or needed. Far from being a weakness, this diversity within the authentic body of Christ is a real plus.

Somewhere near you there are several churches. They may be large, they may be small. Some of the churches may be formal and liturgical, some are spontaneous and informal.

Para-church ministries are even closer, on the internet, radio, magazines and in your mail box. In all of these parts of the body of Christ you will find a group of people growing every day. They are not perfect, they are in process, just like you.

QUESTIONS TO PONDER

1. What is the "good news" of the gospel?
2. How can any news be good for everyone?
3. Does sharing my faith mean cramming my ideology or denominational distinctives down someone's throat?
4. What if I don't know what to say?
5. What if I don't have answers to questions people ask me?
6. If I am still learning about my faith myself, how can I be prepared to share it with someone else?
7. Shouldn't faith be a private issue?
8. How far in "the world" do you have to go to share the good news?
9. Is proclaiming the gospel only up to individuals?
10. How can I be involved in sharing the gospel in a work that is bigger than myself?

These and other questions will be discussed and answered in our next volume, *Journey to Faith, Volume 8: Go Into All the World.*