

STANDARD A: WHO IS JESUS AND WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO FOLLOW HIM?

Lesson 7: What Is the Church?

Introduction

One time Jesus asked His disciples some interesting questions. “What are the crowds saying about Me?” The disciples told Him some things people were saying. Then Jesus turned the question to the disciples. “Who you say I am?” Peter spoke for the group. “The Christ of God” (Luke 9:20). Peter recognized that Jesus was the Messiah.

A. Jesus Christ Is the Head of the Church.

The disciples did not know what would happen as a result of their answers to Jesus. They did not know following Jesus Christ would cost some of them their lives. Nor did they know their allegiance to Jesus Christ would be the foundation for His Church.

Peter confessed that Jesus was the Messiah, the Christ of God. The Book of Matthew in the New Testament gives more information about Jesus’ response to Peter. Jesus told him God had shown Peter that He (Jesus) is the Messiah. Peter had not reached that conclusion by himself (Matthew 13:20).

1. What makes the Church?

Jesus said He would build His Church on the statement that Peter made. The Church of Jesus Christ is made up of people who believe Jesus is the Christ of God. It is composed of people who receive Jesus as their Savior and who then faithfully follow Him. The Church is the community of those who believe that Jesus is the Lord. They have trusted Him for salvation.

Jesus creates the Church by miraculously creating faith in His followers. The Church is His new creation. He builds the Church through the Holy Spirit who lives in the Church. As the people of God, the Church does Christ’s work in the world. The Church brings together people who once had nothing in common. Now because of Christ they become a family of sisters and brothers in the Lord. What unites the Church into one is the presence of Christ among them. The Lord’s Supper, also called Communion, is a sign of the presence of Christ with His people.

2. Who are members of the Church?

All who name Jesus as the Christ of God and who have received Him in their lives are part of Christ's Church. The Church exists wherever the Gospel is preached and received in faith. The Church exists wherever the Holy Spirit creates the new community of Jesus. The Church also exists where Christian baptism and the Lord's Supper are practiced.

3. What does the Church do?

- a. The most important thing the Church does is to worship God. He is the Creator and our Redeemer. Worship is the reverence, honor, and service we show to God. Worshiping God is what Christians do when they come together. They worship one God. They worship in the name of Jesus in whom they meet God.

Christians worship God through songs, praying, and hearing the Word of God. Christians worship God through the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Christians recognize the presence of Christ among them. His presence enables Christians to understand the Scriptures (Luke 24:45).

- b. Empowered by their worship, Christians go out of their fellowship and into the world to witness to Christ. They gather for worship and fellowship. Then they "go into" the world with Jesus' presence renewed within them. Christians witness for Jesus in many different ways. Their entire lives are given in service and obedience to Him. Through His presence and power they live Christlike lives. They witness to Jesus' transforming presence through words and deeds.

As a whole community, the church is a witness to Christ. Its existence as a community of faith and love and its service to others multiplies its strength and witness to Christ. The Church's compassionate ministries in the world come out of Christlike love. Followers of Christ can do no other than love others, even those very different from themselves. A spirit of hate or prejudice is opposite to the community of followers that Christ creates.

At the same time, Christ allows us to witness by speaking directly to others about His transforming grace. We can lead others to be followers of Christ. As a united community, we also proclaim Him. Collectively, we are better able to witness to others, even to those far

from us. We share the Good News of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, and the new life we may have in Him. The new community constantly and creatively reaches out to others. It is always attempting to draw a large circle of love around people.

While still in His resurrected presence, Jesus told His disciples that the Gospel would be preached "to all nations" (Luke 24:47). He told them: "You are witnesses of these things." He told them to wait in Jerusalem until being "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:48). This referred to their being filled with the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, 50 days after the Passover. The Holy Spirit enabled Jesus' followers to be witnesses for Him. They witnessed in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and eventually to the "ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8; Acts 2:1-4).

- c. The Church is also a unique fellowship of redemption that only Christ can create. The Christian fellowship first of all means that Christ has brought us into fellowship with God. Fellowship also means that the Holy Spirit unites us to each other in a way that only He can do. The Church isn't composed of people who are just alike. It exists because of the creative and redeeming presence of Christ in the Church.
- d. As members of the Church, all Christians are accountable to Christ. He is their Master, and they are His disciples. But Christians are also accountable to each other in many ways. One Christian must help another to live as Jesus' disciple. Members of Christ's Church must care and pray for each other. They must be willing to die for each other if necessary. People outside the early Church were impressed by the love the Christians had for each other.

In the power of the Holy Spirit the Church of Jesus continues to live in Christ. It faithfully witnesses to Him by works and by words. This is the Church's life and ongoing mission.

Question: Who or what is the Church?

Question: What are two things your congregation can do to be the Church of Christ?

B. Christ Is Present with Us in the Lord's Supper.

Jesus taught people wherever He went. One morning He was teaching several thousand people outside a town called Bethsaida (Luke 9:10-17). It was a remote place. He was teaching about the kingdom of God. He also healed many people.

As His teaching and healing went on and the people stayed, it became lunchtime. They were hungry. None of them had brought anything to eat. Jesus' followers encouraged Him to send the people into the town to get some food.

But Jesus told His disciples: "You give them something to eat" (Luke 9:13). The disciples wondered: "Us? How can we possibly feed that many?" A quick search of the crowd found only one boy who had five loaves of bread and two fish (John 6:9). In no way would that feed the 5,000 men in the large crowd, along with all the women and children. So how did Jesus expect the disciples to feed so many people with so little food?

Jesus took the five loaves of bread and two fish, looked up to heaven, and broke them. Then the disciples began to distribute it. As they did so, the bread and fish were multiplied. After everyone had eaten, there were still 12 baskets full of broken pieces of food. It was a miracle!

There are many meanings in this story. But one important meaning is related to Jesus' own death. The bread symbolizes Jesus' body that was "broken" for the world. The bread at Bethsaida fed all of those present. Likewise, the "bread" of Christ's body has fed millions of His followers over 20 centuries. That bread continues to feed His followers today. It gives them spiritual life.

The bread symbolizes the presence of Christ with us. We participate in the life of Christ when we take the "Lord's Supper," also called "Communion" and "Eucharist" (or thanksgiving).

Jesus himself started the Lord's Supper right before His death. It was the time of the Passover, which was a feast celebrated by the Jews. On that night Jesus broke bread and gave it to His disciples. He passed to them a cup of wine. He said that this meal was the sign of a "new covenant" (Luke 22:20). This was a new covenant or agreement that God was making with us in Jesus.

To understand this new covenant, we should look back at the old covenant that the Passover represented.

During the yearly Passover feast, the Jews remembered and thought about their liberation from Egypt (see Exodus 12:7-14, 29-51). God was and is concerned for the political, social, and economic bondage of His people. After centuries of suffering, God had raised up Moses – an unlikely liberator – to shake the Hebrews free from slavery in Egypt. God sent nine calamities upon the Egyptians. Still the Pharaoh or ruler of Egypt would not let the Hebrew people

go. The 10th calamity was the most severe. God told Moses He would send death upon all of the firstborn Egyptians, including the firstborn animals.

“This is it,” Moses told the people. “Get ready to go.” Moses told the people to prepare one last meal in Egypt before departing into the wilderness. The Hebrews were to kill a one-year-old, unblemished lamb or goat-kid. It was not to be an old one that would be tough and take long to cook. Some of the animal’s blood had to be sprinkled on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses. If the blood was sprinkled there, death would not come to that house.

On that fateful night, death “passed over” the Hebrews, those who sprinkled blood on their doorposts. The blood kept the Hebrews safe. While the Egyptians suffered death, the Hebrews did not. The blood made the difference.

The last meal in Egypt included unleavened bread, to remind the Hebrews of the haste of their deliverance. There was no time for bread with yeast. Yeast would have represented a lack of trust in God. Using yeast would have meant the people did not believe that God was really going to rescue His people. The Passover was called the Feast of the Unleavened Bread.

Deliverance came. God delivered His people from bondage in Egypt. God chose a liberator, Moses. God worked through Moses to change the condition of His people. However, Moses was unable to do anything for future generations of Hebrews. He certainly was not able to do anything about their unbelief and disobedience. Nevertheless, God led His people to the land He had promised their ancestor Abraham.

The Jews celebrated the Passover yearly. They remembered God’s great act on their behalf. Each year the priests killed lambs or goats the people brought. The priests sprinkled the blood on the altars of the Temple. When the people ate the lambs or goats they remembered the salvation God provided. They read Deuteronomy 26:5 and sang Psalms 113 and 114. It was a time of collective joy for the people of God. No one celebrated the Passover alone. It was a time for God’s people to unite as one and to remember the salvation history they shared. It was a feast only for those who were people of God (Exodus 12:43).

Jesus called His disciples together for the Passover. Jesus told them He had “eagerly desired” to eat this meal with them before His final suffering (Luke 22:15). The Passover represented the last meal of the Hebrews in Egypt. It was also the last supper Jesus shared with His disciples. They ate the lamb, the bitter herbs (that reminded them of their ancestors’ bondage in Egypt), and the unleavened bread. At the supper Jesus took wine and gave thanks for it.

After the supper, Jesus also took some of the unleavened bread. He gave thanks and broke it. He gave it to His disciples. Jesus said, "This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me." Then He took the wine again and said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you" (Luke 22:17-20). Jesus was beginning a new covenant or agreement between God and human beings. It was no longer based on the blood of the Passover lamb. His is the blood of the new covenant. He initiated the Lord's Supper to replace the Passover. He is our "Passover" sacrifice.

Ever since that time, Jesus' followers have reenacted the Lord's Supper, just as the Hebrews did the Passover. Just like the Passover feast, the Lord's Supper is a celebration of the covenant between God and human beings. Just like the Passover feast, it is for the people of God. Just like the Passover, the Lord's Supper (and all Christian worship) includes the reading of Scripture and a song.

The New Covenant that God made with us through Jesus Christ creates a new community. The Lord's Supper seals the fellowship. God's people receive bread and wine (or grape juice), the symbols of the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. God's people come to the Lord's Supper as one united fellowship of Christ's followers. The Lord's Supper is also called the *Eucharist*, which is a Greek word meaning "giving thanks."

When we partake of the Lord's Supper, we not only celebrate what Jesus has done for us. But we also celebrate His grace and presence with us now. Through the bread and wine, Christ comes to us again.

Our resurrected Lord is present with us now like He was with His first disciples. When the minister offers the Lord's Supper, Jesus really is present. He comes in and through the bread and wine to dine with His people. When we eat the bread and drink the wine, we are accepting His presence into our lives. His life becomes a part of us. Our faith is renewed. The Church is renewed. As we remember His suffering and death and recognize His presence, we are transformed. As a sacrament, the Lord's Supper is an outward sign of the inward grace that Christ gives to us.

When Jesus began the Lord's Supper, He talked to His disciples. He said that they would not eat together again quite like this until the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God (Luke 22:16). That great banquet will be something like the feeding of the crowds at Bethsaida. When all of His followers get to heaven, they will all eat together with Jesus. It will be a great celebration.

Question: What is the Lord's Supper?

Question: Why is the Lord's Supper so important to followers of Christ?

Conclusion:

Anyone who becomes a Christian also becomes a part of the Body of Christ, which is His Church. The Church is most visible in congregations of Christians that come together to worship the risen Christ. We call these gatherings of Christians *churches*. In congregations, or churches, Christians learn what it means to live as Christians. They learn how to worship God alone and how to love justice and mercy. They learn how to pray and rejoice in the Lord. All Christians will long to become a part of a congregation of Christians that are faithful to the resurrected Lord. Christ gives all of us gifts we can use to enrich our sisters and brothers in the Lord.

One of the most important signs of Christ's presence in His Church is the Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper is a sacrament ordained by Jesus Christ. It reminds believers of Jesus' death as a sacrifice for sin. It reminds us of new life and salvation through His death. It reminds us of the spiritual blessings Jesus has promised.

The Lord's Supper is for all of Jesus' disciples. They should eat the Lord's Supper only when they know what it means. They should understand that Communion represents Jesus' death. Each time they eat the Lord's Supper, they should remember that Jesus will return. Only persons who have faith in Jesus to save them, and who will love other believers should eat the Lord's Supper.

Activity: Talk with your discipleship group what it means to be part of the Body of Christ.

Activity: Become an active part of a local church or congregation.

Activity: Participate in a Communion service with your congregation.