

What Do You Think When You Hear The Word...Church?

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[0 : 00] Well, tonight I want us to do something just a little bit different. We're going to be looking at various passages. We will come back to Ephesians 4. We'll also be looking at John 17, which we read at the very start. It's all a little bit different tonight because we're starting tonight with a question. The question I want us to ask tonight is, what should you think of when you hear the word church? I don't really know why I felt drawn to do this tonight, but just thinking about what we were preaching on this evening, this is where I just felt that I wanted us to think. It really is a crucial question. What should you think of when you hear the word church? Obviously, there's loads that we could see, loads that we could talk about, and definitely more than we can cover in half an hour. I'm sure there's people saying, when are you ever half an hour? You know what I mean. There's more than we can cover in one service. We can only search the service, but even though that's the case, it's still a really important and really helpful thing for us to think about.

It's important for two reasons in particular. One is because it's very, very easy to think of the wrong things when we hear that word, or at least not necessarily the wrong things, but to have the wrong emphasis in our minds. It's easy for our conclusions to be off target.

The other reason why it's important is because a biblical understanding of the church is actually amazing. It's a wonderful topic for us to think about.

I'm going to start with a wee experiment. I just want to ask you, when I say the word church, what's the first two or three things that pop into your mind? You don't need to tell me, but I just want you to do that in your mind. What pops into your head straight away when you see that word? Probably lots of different things. I do think it's the case that for some of us, maybe even for all of us, there are things that pop into your head that probably aren't quite the things that we should be thinking of. For example, when we hear the word church, we should not be thinking of a building. Now that's difficult because we always call this building the church. I will say it myself, I'm going down to the church to do this, or I'm going to meet so and so at the church.

[2 : 41] We all do it. It's just part of our habit, but that's not what we should primarily think of because the church is not a building. The church is you, the people. The building is the place where the church meets. I think that's so important for us to remember. We have not renovated our church. We have renovated the place where our church meets. That's crucial for us to remember because if worshipers don't have a building, then it's still a church.

If we had to go to a different building, if we went outside or whatever, we'd still be a church. If worshipers don't have a building, then it's still a church. But if a building has no worshipers, then it's not a church because it's the people meeting to worship that makes it a church. That's one example. Another example, when we hear the word church, we should not be primarily thinking denomination. Again, that's difficult because we always refer to different denominations as churches. I did it myself a few minutes ago, the free Church of Scotland, the Church of Scotland, and the many others that we have both in our island and in our nation. Now, of course, all these denominations are part of the church, but they're not a defining characteristic of the church. In fact, really, they are all a problem in the sense that they all represent divisions that we wish were not actually there.

So we shouldn't be thinking building. We shouldn't be thinking denomination. And also, when we hear the word church, we shouldn't be thinking just about the thing that we do twice on a Sunday. And yes, that's definitely part of the church. But if that's all that we think of, if we just think of church as that thing that we do at 11 and 6 p.m. on a Sunday, just as an activity that we do on the first day of the week. Yes, it's true, but it's nowhere near big enough. If that's our view of church, then our

view is way too small. So what should you think of when you hear the word church? What stuff should we consider? Well, again, as I said, there's loads we could say, definitely more than we can cover in one evening. But if you want to go to find a short summary of what we should be thinking when we hear the word church, then a very, very helpful place to go is to what's called the Nicene Creed. Now, if you've never heard of the Nicene Creed before, it was written in the fourth century, the year 325, and then it was expanded in the year 381. It's called the Nicene Creed because it was written at a council of church leaders that met in Nicaea, which is an ancient city in Northwest, what we would call Northwest Turkey. I won't go into too much detail, but that council was gathered to deal with a big controversy that had emerged in the church where many people were denying that Jesus was in fact God. They saw Jesus as less than God. So there was a big controversy about that. The Nicene Creed met in order to deal with that controversy. They wrote the Creed, which is just a summary of key beliefs about the gospel. And then another council meeting in Constantinople, also in Northwest Turkey in 381, expanded that Creed and added some more details. And the Nicene Creed is a document, although we don't read it every week like some churches do. It is a document that we recognize as accurate, as theologically sound, and we would absolutely look to that as a document that we agree with. And it says something about the church in that document. It says, I believe in one holy Catholic and apostolic church.

And that is a brilliant summary of what we should think of when we think of the church. However, I want to adapt it a wee bit, which I feel a bit daunting doing because that was a gathering of some of the greatest theologians in the early church. And I'm changing what they said. I'm only changing it a tiny wee bit because I want to just add one little extra emphasis. When you hear the word church, what do you think of? I want to suggest this.

[7 : 34] You should be thinking of one holy Catholic, apostolic family. And it's these five words I want us to unpack together tonight. So we'd start off with this word here. One. I want to start with a question. Can you very quickly in your minds count up how many churches that are in Lewis? So think through Stourneway and then Roodle areas, Ness, all the way down.

Very, very quickly. Can you see if you can count how many churches that are in Lewis? In your head? You should have reached the number already because the number is one.

There is only one. Only one. And that's a fundamental truth that we have to recognise and that we must never forget. There is only one church of Jesus Christ. And the reason we say that is because scripture makes that absolutely clear. The passage that Noel read for us emphasises that so powerfully. Paul writes about bearing with one another in love, maintaining the unity of the spirit, the bond of peace, because there is one body. That's talking about the church, one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father in all, who's over all and through all and in all. And later on coming down towards verses 10 to 16, the same emphasis.

This is absolutely crucial. It's a truth that we have to think about and it's a truth that we must delight in and it's a truth that we must never, ever neglect. And yet it's really hard to do that because we are so familiar with division and separation and fragmentation in the church that it makes it very, very hard for us to kind of automatically think of the church first and foremost as one. And the result of that means that maintaining this doctrine of the unity of the church is a little bit like trying to maintain a very, very healthy lifestyle. Now, what do I mean by that? Well, let me explain. Every single person in here knows what is involved in being healthy. So our diet, we need to eat really carefully. We need to cut out chocolate, crisps, processed food, takeaways, caffeine, cakes, biscuits, all the stuff I've eaten over the past three days. Instead, we need fruit, vegetables, fish, oily fish, seeds, nuts. At the same time, we need to maintain healthy lifestyle habits, regular exercise, fresh air, a good work, rest, balance, cultivating good hobbies, reading, gardening, walking, all that kind of stuff. And alongside that, we want healthy interests. We want to foster interest in art and in history and in culture, science, literature.

We don't want to waste time watching rubbish, reading things that are just superficial. We want to focus on really good, proper, healthy stuff. All of that's good for us. And we know that all of that's good for us. Hardly any of us live that way. And if you're going over to Stornoway to get dinner, are you going to go and buy a bag of almonds and a tin of sardines or are you going to go for a chippy? Well, I'm going to go for the chippy. And even though we know this, very few people live like this. And for the few people who do live like that, we have got a word that we use to describe them. Weird. They're weird. People who are so good at maintaining that kind of healthy lifestyle, we think,

oh man, that's a bit odd. And exactly the same applies to the doctrine of the church, of the unity of the church. We know that it's true. We know that it's right. But we don't really live as though it matters. And I'm talking to myself before I speak to anybody else. And if we do meet somebody who for whom they would say the unity of the church is in my top five most important beliefs that I live by, we would think that they were weird. And if somebody came to Carlaway, and he came to both Kirk sessions and said to the Kirk sessions, the single most important thing that you need to do over the next five years is work towards undoing the division that exists in this community. What would we think of them? We would think, oh man, I don't know if that's right. And what should I agree with that? What would the

[12 : 45] Apostle Paul say about them? He would say they are 100% right. And that's massively important for us to remember. It's important for us to remember that when the seeds of denominations are being formed in Corinth, where some people said I follow Paul, some people said I follow the denomination of Apollos, some people I follow the denomination of Cephas, others I follow Christ, Paul says, no, don't do it. Christ is not divided. You must remain as one. So the New Testament is absolutely crystal clear that the church is one. And so when we hear that word church, that's what we must think of the fact that we are one. And just to finally reinforce the importance of that, I'm going to just put on the screen a list of some of the most important doctrines, some of the biggest doctrines of the Christian faith, the Trinity, one God, three persons, father, son, and Holy Spirit, covenant theology, the fact that God is dealing with his people by means of covenant, that this thread of covenant runs right through scripture, the atonement, the saving work that Jesus accomplished on the cross, union with Christ, the great doctrine explaining how we benefit from that and we're connected to the Lordship of Christ, the fact that he reigns over all the sacraments, the fact that we observe baptism and the Lord's supper, eschatology, the doctrine of the end times. These are all massive, massive theological doctrines. They are all directly linked to the fact that there is one church. Every single one of these feeds in to the fact that the church is one. You see that with the Trinity in the words that we read at the start, listen so carefully to what Jesus says here. He's talking about his people, the church, those who are going to believe after the apostles, after the disciples who will believe through their preaching. He's saying, I do not ask for these only, so not just for my disciples in front of me, but also for those who will believe in me through their words. So that's us and every other believer that they may be one. And then he says this, just as you,

Father, are in me and I in you that they also may be in us so that the world may believe that you've sent me the glory that you've given me. I've given to them so that they may be one even as we are one. I in them and you in me that they may become perfectly one so that the world may know that you've sent me and love them even as you loved me. These words here, the ones I've underlined are emphasizing the fact that the oneness of God, that union and unity between God, the Father, God, the Son, God, the Holy Spirit, that's the basis of the unity of God's people that we might all be one. So the Trinity is feeding into one church, covenant theology at the heart of that is God establishing his covenant people. That's the one church, one united covenant people. The atonement doesn't just reconcile us to God vertically, it also reconciles us to one another horizontally as Jesus brings us all into his family. Union with Christ, we're united to him, every single believer is united to him. So every single believer is united to one another. You cannot be united to Christ without being united to every other believer. That drives home the unity of the church. The Lordship of Jesus, the fact that he alone is Lord, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, he's the Lord. And so he doesn't have a thousand different churches, he has one. He's only Lord, he's only Lord of one, he's only head of one body because there is only one. The sacraments, baptism, one baptism, the same baptism in every congregation, that's the one baptism that unites us into the people of God, the Lord supper, the same thing, that communion, that togetherness of God's family. And then eschatology, this in many ways, drives it home all the more. How many denominations will there be in heaven?

I don't even need to tell you the answer. One people forever worshiping God as his precious people. When you think of the church, you must think of this word, that word, one. Second word you need to think of is the word holy. That again is emphasized right through the Bible. Let me read a couple of key passages. First Corinthians 1, 1-2, Paul called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus and a brother Sostanese to the church of God that is in Corinth to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the

name of the Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and theirs. In 1 Peter 1, 14-16, as obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance. But as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct. Since it is written, you shall be holy for I am holy. Now when you hear that word holy, what should you think of? You should think of two things. You should think of the idea of being set apart and you should think of something that is pure. Set apart and pure. Now first and foremost, God is both of these things. He is set apart. He alone is creator. He is in a category of his own, utterly unique. And he is impeccably pure. There's no corruption, no contamination, no distortion, no blemishes in God. And the church, as Peter tells us here, is to be like him. So we have been set apart. We've been brought from darkness into light. We've been taken from the broad road to the narrow road from the kingdom of evil into the kingdom of God. And the church is being cleansed. Our guilt is washed away in the cross and we're being transformed by the sanctifying work of

God, the Holy Spirit. And again, there's loads that we could say here. I just want to highlight two crucial things that when we talk about this holiness, we are talking about our status and our calling. Our status and our calling. So in terms of our status, as the church, we are holy. Now that's emphasized so much in these words of 1 Corinthians. The word holy doesn't appear in those verses, as you can see. But the concept of holiness is there because you have that word sanctified and you have the word saints. Now this doesn't come through in English as well as it does in Greek. That the word holy, the word sanctified, the word saints, it's all the same word. It's all based in the same word. And it would be probably much better for us to see that if we translated the word sanctified as holinessified, even though we don't have that word. And instead of saying saints, we said holy ones because that's how it sounds in Greek. It's the same word *hagios*. It's all the same sound for each word. So we are holy. And that word sanctified there is so important. It's in a special tense that the Greek language uses called the perfect tense. And the perfect tense is referring to something that happened in the past, but which extends into the future. And that's exactly what it's referring to. You've been sanctified, set apart by coming to faith in Jesus and the implications of that extend forevermore. So it's what we are. It's our status. But it's also a calling. You see that in both passages, but perhaps most clearly in Peter, where he says, just as he is holy, so you also be holy in all your conduct. And so this is one of many of what we call a both and truths in the back. In the sense that that's not either or, it's not you either are holy or you will be holy. It's both. We are holy. We are called to be holy. We are definitively sanctified through the cross.

We're commanded to be holy as we seek to follow Jesus and to apply his word to his lot to our lives. But I guess the question you have to ask us what does being holy look like? And again, that's a really important thing to think about because when we hear that word holy, we can really easily misunderstand it. It's so easy to think that the word holy means being deadly serious, being heavily burdened and being maybe a little bit miserable. That's what we can easily think of that, you know, for kind of serious and somber and maybe just a little bit flat because of the state of the world and the state of our hearts that that's the sign of holy is not true, not true. We've got to remember what we said holiness means being set apart and it means being pure. And so holiness means being different from everything that is rubbish and broken in this world. And it means turning away from everything that is corrupting and damaging and that spoils our lives and that leads us away from Jesus.

[23 : 14] In other words, holiness describes all the ways in which the gospel makes a massive and beautiful difference to our lives. So for example, if you see people singing for joy because of what Jesus has done for them, that's holiness. You see people showing kindness and generosity to people around them because they love Jesus and because he's done so much for them and they want to show that love to others. That is holiness. As we go to work as Christians and we show we give encouragement to others as we're gentle with the people around us, that's holiness. When someone hurts us and we forgive them and we don't bear a grudge, we don't harbor bitterness, but we just wipe the slate clean. That's holiness. When we eat together as a church family, when we bring unbelievers into that setting and share our lives with them, that's holiness. When we tell people that we're praying for them and we pray for them, that's holiness. And above all, as we love each other, as we really love each other, that is holiness. And that is what the church should be known for. When you hear the word church, you should be thinking holy. Third one, the church is Catholic. Now, you'll be forgiven if you can ever think, what do you mean Thomas? Or if you're thinking, oh, yikes, what do you mean? We don't tend to use that word. And in the Reformed church, we draw very strong and clear historical distinctions between the Reformed church and the

Roman Catholic church. But of course, when we see that word Catholic, we're not referring to Roman Catholic, we are referring to the broader meaning of the word Catholic, which simply means universal.

That's what the word Catholic means. We're saying that the world, that the church is universal. And that's an incredibly important aspect of what the church is. And there's two things I want to highlight regarding that. First thing to say is that that Catholicity is grounded on the universal lordship of Jesus. So right now, Jesus is risen and exalted at the right hand of God. He's King of kings. He's Lord of lords. He is sovereign over everything.

And he is the head of the church. So he's Lord of all over every square inch of the universe, over every square inch of the church. It's his church, his body, his bride. And that reality extends across the whole of his church. His lordship is universal. Therefore, his church is Catholic. The second thing, though, that Catholicity refers to is the fact that the church is not confined by either location or time. The church is not confined to a particular location or to a particular time. And so that means that the one church of Jesus Christ is spread across the whole of the earth. That was the great mission that Jesus gave to his disciples when he was to be ascended. You're going to be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, in Samaria, and to the end of the earth. And that's exactly what happened. That's exactly what's still happening. The church is spreading across the world. It's not confined to a particular location. And the means, the channel through which Jesus is doing that, is through local church congregations being established in communities all across the world. That's how the universal Catholic church is spreading. And so it spreads all over the whole earth. But at the same time, that one church of Jesus Christ is spread over all the generations of history. So it's the same church that was foreshadowed in the Old Testament that was fulfilled and formed, founded in the ministry of Jesus. It was established then through the work of the apostles. And then from there it has expanded through the mission of the church across the centuries. And that's why we stand connected to people who have lived in the centuries before us. And that's why we look ahead and we even pray for the generations yet to be born who will continue to spread the message of Jesus. We were once an unborn generation and God has raised us up to spread the good news of Jesus. And we pray that more will rise after us. Now to help understand this, theologians will often distinguish between the church invisible and the church visible. And that's just a helpful way of recognizing the fact that these two aspects reflect the Catholicity of the church. So there is the invisible church, the fact that you can't see the whole church together at one point. You can't see the fact that there are believers here all across the world and that there are believers now in heaven in glory awaiting the return of Jesus and the resurrection of our bodies. It's all one church and that invisible body of God's chosen people is the whole church connected together. But at the same time the church is visible through the congregations like ours on earth in different places and at different times. And so that distinction between the visible church and the invisible church is really, really helpful. I was going to go through two paragraphs in the Westminster Confession of Faith that talk about that but I don't have time. You can read them for yourselves. If you do have a copy of the Westminster Confession of Faith, it's chapter 25 you want to look at. And it just has that distinction between the invisible church and the visible church. It's very helpful to read.

One thing I want to just mention, the final point I want to mention in relation to the Catholicity of the church is that it reminds us that first and foremost that is what we are part of. So when we are baptized, you're not baptized into a congregation, you're baptized into that universal church of Jesus Christ. As members, we are not primarily members of this congregation, we are members of that church. When we serve as office-bearers, we are primarily office-bearers of that Catholic universal church. And yes, we love our local church. That's where we pour our service into. That's where we try to serve Jesus in the community where God has placed us. And the work of the Gospel is impossible without local churches like this. But we must never, ever, ever forget that this local church here in Carlyway is part of something bigger, part of something massive. And as we sing Jesus' praises here tonight, our voices are joining with the voices of millions that are being heard in heaven as Jesus is praised today. And that means something amazing. It means that you can go to any part of the world and if you go there and you find people who are meeting in the name of Jesus, who are preaching the Gospel and who are worshiping Him as Savior, you can look at them and you can say, that's my church. Because we are all part of the same thing. The church is Catholic. Fourth, the church is apostolic. Two key passages here, I'm going to read them both. John

16, Jesus said, I've said, I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, but he will not speak of his own authority. But whatever he hears, he will speak and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine, therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. Now this is an incredibly important passage there because it's basically explaining to us why the rest of the New Testament was written. Jesus is preparing his disciples for the fact that he is going to depart and he says, I've not told you everything that you need to know.

[32 : 19] I still have many things that I need to say to you, but I can't tell you them now. However, when the spirit of truth comes, which took place in the day of Pentecost, from that point he is going to guide the apostles into all the truth. And that's what led to the writing of the New Testament. The apostles were guided by the Holy Spirit to write God's word and to give us the full body of information that's contained in the pages of the New Testament.

He guides us into truth. And so you have the ministry of the apostles fulfilling these words of Jesus whereby the rest of what Jesus wanted to tell us is taught through the ministry of the apostles. That's why in Ephesians 19 he can speak about, Paul can speak about the foundation of the apostles and prophets. So you're no longer dangerous and aliens, but you're fellow citizens with the saints, members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone in whom the whole structure being joined together grows into a holy temple in the Lord. And so here you've got this emphasis in the fact that the apostles have a unique role. They are a foundation on which the church is built and that foundation is the apostolic writings that we have in the New Testament. All of that is emphasising the fact that the church is apostolic. Now what we mean by that is the fact that the church exists within the boundaries of apostolic teaching. In other words, the church exists within the boundaries of what the Bible says. And that is why false teaching is so dangerous. And that is why a false gospel means that you are no longer a church. The church of Jesus Christ is apostolic.

You follow what the Bible teaches. Now two crucial lessons we have to think about here. One is that we have to guard that message. Paul says that to Timothy, he says, by the Holy Spirit who dwells within you, guard the good deposit entrusted to you. And that work of guarding the gospel has continued through all the generations of the church. That's our responsibility for our generation. We must guard the gospel and make sure we continue to proclaim the truth as revealed in Scripture through Jesus Christ. We've got to be vigilant in that. We've got to guard that good deposit that the apostles have given to us. That's crucial. Second thing that's crucial is that we have got to recognise the difference between fundamentals and non-fundamentals. And this is something that we fail to do many, many times. You see this distinction in the New Testament. You see Paul and the other apostles will say that the incarnation, the fact that God the Son became human, that's fundamental.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ, that is fundamental. The reality of sin and judgment, that is fundamental. The centrality of justification by faith, that is fundamental. And these things are absolutely crucial. But there's also stuff that's not fundamental. So in the New Testament, eating meat or not eating meat, Paul says, I don't mind. Some people wanted to observe particular days, other people thought that they shouldn't observe particular days. Paul said, I don't mind. And we're the same. There's loads of things that will have differences of opinion on, even in our congregation here, from whatever, everything, what we wear, what we do, we'll all have differences of opinion on little things that are not fundamental.

And another non-fundamental in the New Testament that's crucial to recognise is the non-fundamental of making mistakes. If somebody makes a mistake in the New Testament church, if someone stuffs up as a Christian, the fundamental is not, get rid of them. The fundamental is help them, restore them, disciple them, nurture them and care for them. And I think that it's got to be said that we have got to stop falling out over the 1% that we disagree on. And you look at our own island, there are so many Christians who agree on 99%, but they make a massive issue of the 1%. And sometimes that can even be something that the Bible doesn't talk about. All of this is just highlighting the fact that the church is apostolic. What matters is that we follow apostolic teaching, that we keep coming back to everything that the apostles have taught us. Thankfully, finishing at 7 is also a non-fundamental. I'm almost done. The church is one, the church is holy, the church is Catholic, the church is apostolic.

[38 : 30] I want us to recognise and never forget that the church is a family. That's the truth that runs right through the whole of scripture. We saw this on Thursday night, we had a brilliant prayer meeting together, looking at the fact that we have been made children of God through our Saviour, Jesus. God the Father is our Father. All of our Father, if you're a Christian or if you become one, Jesus is our elder brother for all of us, we're his brothers and sisters for all of us who believe. And the Holy Spirit unites us together in that family as brothers and sisters. And really that reality is crucial to everything that we've been saying. We can't be one if we don't behave like family and stick together. We can't be holy unless we behave like a family and love one another and care for one another and display all the goodness and purity and wonderfulness of God. We cannot be Catholic if we don't behave as a family because the church is universal, we're all connected together. And if we don't act like family, then we are ignoring the Apostles' teaching. We need to behave as a family in order for us to be apostolic. And it's just an amazing reminder that Jesus is calling us all to be part of something amazing. And that's the incredible privilege of following Jesus, that not only do we get to know him, but we get to go on this journey together as a church family, supporting one another, loving one another, bearing with one another, going for it together, and with Jesus' help calling other people into that wonderful family as well. It's such a massive privilege. It's such an exciting thing to be part of. And if you are not yet a Christian, if you're not yet sure where you stand, I want you to be certain of absolutely one thing, that when we talk about this one holy Catholic apostolic family, there is room for you as well.