

We believe in the Church

February 19, 2023 \* Langford Community Church \* Graham Gladstone

You've probably heard this rhyme before –

*Here is the church and here is the steeple,  
Open up the doors and see all the people.*

Now that's a cute little rhyme isn't it? And for a lot of people, that's probably what they think of when they hear the word 'church.' They say 'church' and they mean the building.

But that's not what 'church' means in the Bible. Whenever the Bible talks about 'church,' it has nothing to do with pews and steeples. Instead – well, let me tweak the rhyme a little – from God's point of view, the rhyme goes like this:

Here is the church (ie. the people).

Whenever the Bible talks about 'the church' it talks about the people, not the building.

But that raises a lot of questions – *which* people are the church? Does going to church mean you belong to the church? Does having your name on a list mean you belong to it even if you don't go? What exactly IS the Church? And what does it mean for us to belong to it?

The final statement in our statement of faith answers those questions so let's look together at it and see what we believe about the church. Let's read it together – it's number 7 on the list.<sup>i</sup>

*We believe in the spiritual unity of all who truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, that is, the only Holy, Universal Church, which is the Body of Christ.*

In my mind that breaks down into three points – we believe in the spiritual unity of believers, we believe in the holy, universal Church and we believe that the Church is the Body of Christ. That's what we believe about the Church – let's look at them one at a time to see what they mean.

So first, we believe in the spiritual unity of all who truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me ask you a little trivia question here – what do you have in common with St. Augustine, Martin Luther and Mother Theresa? It's not that you're all influential church leaders; it's that we've all experienced the grace of God.

To pick up the language of sin and grace from statements 5 & 6, when we turn from sin to God by grace through faith, God washes away our sin and takes us out of our own little individualistic experience and puts into a brand new family – the community of all those who

have also been redeemed. And He doesn't just drop us into it and say 'Ok, make some new friends,' He unites us with every other believer in every time and every place.

J. C. Ryle put it like this:

We are all born of the Spirit; we all possess repentance towards God, faith towards our Lord Jesus Christ and holiness of life. We all hate sin and we all love Christ. We worship differently and in different ways... but we all worship with one heart. We are all led by one Spirit; we all build on one foundation; we all draw our [faith] from one single Book – that is the Bible. We are all joined to one great center – that is Jesus Christ.<sup>ii</sup>

As believers we are united as one with every other believer who has ever lived.

Just think about that – if you are a believer, you have a spiritual bond that connects you to the Apostle Paul, the church fathers, the Reformers, the family members who have gone before us and borne witness to Jesus in their lives, the believers who are yet to come – we are all spiritually united with them as one community of people who have been redeemed by the grace of God. We're not just making things up as we go along; we stand in a long line of believers who have borne witness to Jesus and we have a responsibility to keep that game of pass-it-on going.

Jesus talks about this connection in John 17 – He starts off praying for the disciples who are with Him in the room at that time and then He says:

20 "My prayer is not for them alone [ie., the believers in His time]. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message [that's us], 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you... 23 ...May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:23 NIV).

Jesus' intention for us as believers is not that we be 'lone wolves,' just me-and-Jesus like I used to think. Jesus' intention for us and God's plan for us is for us to belong to and be nurtured by a community of faithful people who have truly believed in the Son of God.

Now let's talk about that, that 'truly believed' part, because that's an important detail – we believe in the spiritual unity of all who *truly believe* in the Lord Jesus Christ. To be a part of the spiritual unity of all believers then you need to truly believe in the Son of God.

Let's be honest here. We all know that there are people who go to churches who have absolutely no interest in what the church does. We all know that there are people who like the social aspect of church but couldn't care less about the spiritual part. We all know that there are people who say that they are Christians but never darken the door of the church. Their name may even be on a membership list somewhere, but that doesn't mean that they belong to the community of the redeemed, the 'big C Church.' Only people whose hearts have been

softened by God to turn from sin and turn to Him by grace through faith belong to the Church; and those are the only people who will experience salvation.

Jesus talks about this kind of thing in Matthew 7 - 21 "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

22 Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?'

23 Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

Paul talks about people who 16 "... claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him... (Tit 1:16 NIV) and "5 [have] a form of godliness but denying its power" (2Ti 3:2-5 NIV).

This is a hard truth but it's one that we need to recognize – only those people who truly believe in Jesus belong to the church. And the last two statements in our statement of faith that explain why – remember – there's not 'the good,' the 'nice' and 'the evil;' there's the sinners and there's the saved; there's the saved and the lost and only those who have turned from their sin to trust in the atoning death of Jesus by grace through faith (through belief) belong to the church of God.

Again, J. C. Ryle puts it well:

"Do you belong to the one true Church; to the Church outside of which there is no salvation? I do not ask where you go on Sunday; I only ask, 'Do you belong to the one true Church?'"<sup>iii</sup>

If you have turned from sin to trust in God, then you belong to the 'one true Church,' the 'big C' church. You are united in faith with all the believers who have ever lived and WILL ever live and you will live in eternity with them. And it's by believing that you become a part of the Church.

The one true Church is the spiritual union of all who truly believe.

And that's what our statement of faith says next:

We believe in the spiritual unity of all who truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, that is, the only Holy, Universal Church...

Which is to say that we believe that all who truly believe are united spiritually as the one, Holy, Universal Church.

Each of those words is important.

We believe that there is ONE Church. Like Ryle said, there is ONE church outside of which there is no salvation. We're not the kind of church that says 'all roads lead to God' because as Jesus says in John 14:6 'No one comes to the Father except through me.'

So we affirm that there is only ONE church, only ONE community of faith that will experience salvation, but we need to nuance that a bit. Because sometimes we think: 'ok, there's the Protestant church and the Roman Catholic church and the Greek orthodox church and the Russian orthodox church' and all the denominations in between – which one is the one true church? In reality, there is only one big C Church. The one Big C Church is the group of people who will live together for eternity and it is made up of all who truly believe, whether they attend a Protestant church or a Catholic one or an Orthodox one.

Hoola hoops?

This is really important – there are many 'little c' churches but only one big C Church and it is made up of all who believe.

We believe there is ONE Church and we believe that that one church is a HOLY Church. Now that word 'holy' literally just means 'set apart.' It's literally the word that you would use when you set something aside for special use. How many of you have fine silverware in your house? Would you use it to scrape out the bottom of the lawnmower? No, you set it apart for special use. You've got a fancy dress or you've got a suit and tie – do you wear that out to the barn? You set it aside for special things.

That's the HOLY Church. God has set aside this community of believers, cleansed us of sin and called us out from the world, to be different from the world and to be the base camp from which we can further extend His holiness into the world.

Peter puts it like this in 1 Peter 2:9:

9 But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. (1Pe 2:9 NIV).

When we put our faith in Jesus, He cleanses us from sin and brings us into a new, holy community. Now that's not to say that we become 'a museum for saints.' Instead, we fix ourselves on the holiness that Jesus have given, and then reach out to the world, untainted by the world, to be a hospital for sinners.

We believe that there is ONE church, one HOLY Church set apart from the world and one UNIVERSAL Church, made up off all believers in all times and places. When we say 'universal' we don't mean that everybody will be saved and so belong to the Church – the Church is made up of all who truly believe – but wherever those true believers come from, whenever they lived, they are the Church together.

So believe in the ONE, HOLY, UNIVERSAL CHURCH. And that word 'church' (ekklesia) literally means 'called out ones.' Like when supper's ready in our house, I'll say – 'Supper's ready – put

down your book or your iPad or whatever and come and eat' – the people who show up at the table are 'the called out ones.' The ones who have left behind what they were doing to participate in something new.

And that's the Church. We're called out of our old way to living, to be the pure, spotless, blameless people that Jesus died to make us, and to be that pure, spotless, blameless community together.

We believe in the spiritual unity of all who truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, that is, the only Holy, Universal Church...

But here's the thing. The only, holy, universal spiritual unity of all who believe is not just an organization, it is an organism. It is a body. And not just any body, the Church is Jesus' Body.

We believe in the spiritual unity of all who truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, that is, the only Holy, Universal Church, which is the Body of Christ.

This comes straight from the Bible. Romans 12:4-5 says "4 Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, 5 so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" and

1 Corinthians 12:27 concludes a big description of the Church as the Body of Christ by saying: "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (1Co 12:27 NIV).

As the Church, we are together and individually the physical, tangible representation of Jesus in the world.

And as His Body, we have a job to do. God has equipped us as a church and as individuals with spiritual gifts and abilities that allow Him to work through us in the world to be a blessing to the world.

As Teresa of Avila famously wrote:

Christ has no body but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours.

Yours are the eyes with which he looks compassionately on this world.

Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good.

Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.

Yours are the hands.

Yours are the feet.

Yours are the eyes.

You are his body.

Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours.<sup>iv</sup>

We are the Body of Christ and we have a job to do.

We believe in the spiritual unity of all who truly believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, that is, the only Holy, Universal Church, which is the Body of Christ.

You've probably noticed that from time to time I've described our statement of faith as the ABC's of our faith and I realized that we can do that here too. I'll summarize our statement for you like this:

We believe that A. ALL who believe are united spiritually as B. the BODY of Christ, which is C. the Church.

Let me apply this message with these headings.

We believe that ALL who believe are united spiritually in a common bond of unity. If you have made a decision to follow Jesus and you are acting on that decision to believe in Him, then you are united not only with Christ Himself but with every other believer who has ever lived, in every time and every place. You have a spiritual connection with other believers that goes deeper than blood or class or race.

And I've actually been hiding an example of that under your nose this whole time. If you look at our handout for the statement of faith, you'll see an image there that's like of stained glass representation of what we believe. That didn't just come from nowhere.

I was looking around online for an image that I could use and came across that one. I don't like to use stuff online without getting permission and so I emailed the church that originally used it. That led to a really neat exchange with them where the person who made it personally contacted me and gave me her blessing to use it (and like five other versions if I wanted) and the pastor of the church specifically prayed for us as a church here at Langford. They're down in the States but instantly I felt a connection with them because as fellow members of the Body of Christ, we are united spiritually. Same with the Kenyan believers that we've sent Bibles to. Different continent, same big C Church. Wherever you go, you have brothers and sisters in the worldwide body of Christ.

And that's actually reflected in that image. You'll actually see around the bottom of the HS/dove image bread and cup with people in between.

And that's part of the reason that if you belong to the Church, it's absolutely crucial that you come to church. I know that there are many things happening on Sunday mornings, but the most important thing for us on any given Sunday is to meet with other believers to be sharpened as iron sharpens iron. We build each other up as a church. And if you leave church saying 'I don't feel like anyone built me up, I would gently encourage you to ask – who did you build up today? And have you invested in your faith enough through the week that you are able to be an encouragement to others on a Sunday morning?

So we believe that A. all who believe are united spiritually and B. we believe that all are united spiritually as the B. BODY of Christ. Just think about that for a moment. We're not just some little church out on the highway between Brantford and Ancaster. We're no mere social organization that does good deeds. We are the literal, physical BODY of Christ here on earth.

If you don't belong to the one true Church, Jesus is inviting you into fellowship with Him in the most personal way possible – He is inviting you to become a part of Himself, a part of His Body that has value and purpose even bigger than your own personal value and purpose.

And if you DO belong to the on true Church, then when believed, the Holy Spirit gave you talents and abilities enable you to accomplish God's purposes on earth. Think about who you are. Think about what you love and what you're good at. Those are gifts that God has given not just for yourself but for the benefit of others. Think about how you might put those gifts to work in the Church. Paul compares the Church to a Body where each part of it is doing something - each of us should have some way in which we are contributing to the life of the Church together. If you need some ideas, ask me – there are lots of ways for you to participate in the Body.

So A., we believe at ALL who believe are part of the B. Body of Christ which is the C Church. We believe that we are a part of the one, only, holy, universal 'called out' community of God.

This I think is especially important for a church like ours. In a rural setting like this, it would be really easy to focus on the Langford Community part of our name and just be a little social club out here on the highway.

But as people who truly believe in the redeeming grace of Jesus Christ, we are not just a little social club. We are a part of Jesus' Body, called out of the world to be different from the world. We need to think consciously about what we're doing and how it contributes uniquely to our mission as Langford Community CHURCH.

I think it's great that we do stuff like turkey pies, but I would love it if we could include on the instruction sticker – 'Thank you for supporting Langford Church' – and have a link to our website where people can see the missions their money is supporting. I could even make an LCW page so people could browse around and maybe listen to a message while they're there.

Some churches have dialed back their identity as a church in order to be more appealing to secular people; they're the ones that are closing. We need to lean into our spirituality, to be different from the world, to offer hope and escape from the pressures and sins of the world that threaten to overwhelm people.

~~There's a neat quotation in Philip Yancey's *Why Church?* He quotes Karl Barth who says "[The Church] exists to set up in the world a new sign which is radically dissimilar to [the world's own manner] and which contradicts it in a way which is full of promise."~~<sup>14</sup>

How do we do that? Well, I think that the health of the church depends entirely upon the health of our hearts. Not just mine, but all of ours. When we each nurture our spiritual vitality, listen to God in prayer, apply what He says in our community of faith, that's when we will really thrive. That's why reading your Bible and praying is so important; in that time, God sets us up to accomplish His will.

That's how we be 'Langford Community CHURCH' – we each actively pursue the Lord together.

We believe that ALL people who truly believe are spiritually united as the BODY of Christ which is the CHURCH.

Now to cap off this series and this sermon, I thought that it would be really appropriate to celebrate the Lord's Supper together. Because the Lord's Supper is the symbolic act that Jesus Himself gave to the Church to commemorate that sacrifice that made us the Church.

And to symbolize the fact that we're not reinventing the wheel here, to recognize that we stand in a long line of believers who have come before us, I thought it would be appropriate to use a Communion outline from another time. So this is actually from a 1960's United Church Service book; some of you have probably even said these words before. So let's pray and prepare our hearts and then we'll make our way through the Communion service together.

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<sup>i</sup> And importantly for us here at Langford Church – what are we doing here? What are we doing that makes us Langford Community Church? In a church like ours, it could be easy to focus on the 'Langford Community' part and make this a social club; what is it about who we are and what we do that makes us Langford Community Church?

<sup>ii</sup> Since Ryle wrote this in the third person ('they'), I've paraphrased it into the first person ('we') to make it more personal. From J. C. Ryle, 'The True Church,' *The Fundamentals* (Crossreach Publications, 2019) pg. 334.

<sup>iii</sup> J. C. Ryle, 'The True Church,' *The Fundamentals* (Crossreach Publications, 2019) pg. 334.

<sup>iv</sup> [https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa\\_Of\\_Avila\\_Christ\\_Has\\_No\\_Body.shtml](https://www.journeywithjesus.net/PoemsAndPrayers/Teresa_Of_Avila_Christ_Has_No_Body.shtml)

<sup>v</sup> Karl Barth in Philip Yancey's *Church: Why Bother?*, pg. 40.