

Part 1 in this eight-part series on *The Church* begins with the understanding that the early church met in homes, as indicated throughout the New Testament; e.g. Acts 2:46; Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2. The Greek word, *oikos*, refers to a house or residence inclusive of contents and occupants. Thus, *oikos* may be translated as “home” or “household” or “family.” These terms accurately describe the 1st century church, because members met in homes and regarded themselves as a family of brothers and sisters in Christ.

Hebrews 13:8 states that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Therefore, in both essence and purpose, the church of Jesus Christ is also the same yesterday and today and forever. This means that the essential nature, characteristics and practices of the church as a spiritual family in Christ cannot change. Sadly, throughout history the church has gone from one identity crisis after another in an ongoing effort to be relevant to a world that was and is always changing. Consequently, many professing Christians look more like the world, and less like Christ. The first step in addressing this identity crisis is to understand and answer these five existential questions: Who are we? Why are we here? What do we believe? Where are we going? How do we get there?

Question 1 – Who are we? I’m reminded immediately of the double-edged question, “Who are you and what do you do?” No doubt, you’ve both asked and been asked that question in one form or another. Resumes are all about us telling others who we are and what we can do. Your purpose is to get a job, but the employer’s purpose is to benefit from what you have to offer, not vice versa. The question, “Who are you and what do you do?” dates back to an old Danish folktale about Jesper, a young man intent on marrying a king’s lovely daughter. The king gives a difficult challenge, which Jesper knows he cannot accomplish on his own. While traveling through the forest to the castle, five men approach Jesper separately to ask if they can come aboard. To each one he says, “Who are you and what do you do?” After they respond, Jesper sets a condition and brings them aboard. When he arrives at the castle, Jesper finds that he must call on each passenger to do what he cannot. In the end, Jesper gets the girl without really doing anything himself, except giving several strangers a ride. This happens all the time in the real world, but gives a distorted view by basing our identity, and often our value as well, on what we do, not who we are.

The right answer to the question – Who are we? – does not come from the world, but from the One who truly knows us, loves us and values us, not for what we’ve done or left undone, but just because He does. This question is answered simply and beautifully in 1 Corinthians 12:27, where the Apostle Paul succinctly states, “You are the body of Christ, and individually members of it.” Notice the focus, which is on the body as a whole, not the individual as a separate entity. In the Western world the individual comes first, then the community, but not so in Scripture, where individual identities are known only in the context of community.

The church in Corinth was a divided body, not unlike many churches today. One reason was because individuals put their own interests before the needs and interests of the body as a whole, not unlike many churches today. Paul addresses this problem by saying that “the body is not one member, but many.” He then illustrates his point in this way: “If the foot says, ‘Because I am not a

hand, I am not part of the body.' It is not for this reason any less a part of the body. And if the ear says, 'Because I am not an eye, I am not part of the body.' It is not for this reason any less part of the body. His point is that each member has both a place and purpose in the body to benefit the whole. The beauty of this in God's economy is that when the entire body benefits, each member also benefits. It's a win-win outcome. Similarly, the church is a body of brothers and sisters in Christ, each with particular abilities and gifts to be used for the good of the whole, not just one part. For this reason, we follow God's word conveyed through Paul, such that, "if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.

Question 2 – Why are we here? From a worldly perspective, my first thought is to say that we are here on this planet to do something. From childhood on, family members, friends and even strangers are often asking us what we want to be when we grow up. What they're really asking is what we want to do when we grow up, but in our world the word "be" is often substituted with the word "do," even though their meanings are totally different. God answers that question for us in a most wonderful way that is as strange to us as it is familiar. It's strange, because we answer the question with doing, while God answers with being. It's familiar, at least in a loving family, because married couples bring children into the world to love and nurture. There's really nothing like being loved, and that's why we're here. Very likely, the most well-known and quoted verse in the Bible is John 3:16, where Jesus states, "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..." Those few words speak volumes about the reason why God brought us into existence, both as individuals and as members of His family, the body of Christ. "The world" that Jesus refers to is everyone, everywhere. Our heavenly Father loves unconditionally the broken people in this broken world infinitely more than loving parents who never stop loving their wayward children. The love of God is priceless, but worth lavishing on all who receive His mercy and grace through faith, and become His beloved children. This is why we are here – to be loved by God.

Question 3 – What do we believe? I have studied and subscribed to long lists of beliefs that Christians are expected to know, understand and hold to be true. Four years of seminary gave me much of what I know about the Christian faith in terms of its history, theology and doctrine, and I'm grateful for it. Yet, seminary did not give me an experience with God in the form of a personal relationship, and that's what it's all about. If what's in your head is not realized in your heart, your faith is as good as dead. In fact, believe, faith and trust are all derived from the same Greek word, so in many ways they are synonymous. Therefore, to say that I believe in Jesus means that I put my faith in Him as my Savior and trust Him as my Lord. It's all about relationship, and this is what the Apostle John communicated throughout his gospel, such that he closes chapter 20 by saying, "many other signs Jesus also performed in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book, but these have been written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." In other words, John could have said a lot more, but he has written enough for readers like you and me to be assured of the true identity of Jesus as

God's Son, the Messiah, who gave His life to give us life. Jesus Christ, and He alone, is both the foundation and very essence of our faith.

Question 4 – Where are we going? If you're like me, you have a destination in mind. For the world, that destination is a dead end, known as the grave. For the Christian, the destination is heaven. However, although that is true, I think it misses the ultimate destination God intends, which is not limited to the "pie in the sky by and by," but begins for us when we begin with Him. As a parent, I want the very best for my children and grandchildren. For me, and I think for most parents, I am far more interested in whom they are becoming than where they are going. I believe God has the same interest. So, where we are going is not as much a place as it is a person. I really want my children and grandchildren to mature into men and women of Christ-like character. God desires the same for His children, "until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ." The destination then, as articulated in that verse from Ephesians 4:13, is Christ. Where we are going then, as God's adopted children, is to become more and more and more like our Father's only begotten Son.

Question 5 – How do we get there? A short answer to that question is that we do not get there, because we cannot get there. I for one am a person who tries very hard to get to wherever I think I need or want to go, but sometimes the destination is too far or too hard or both, as in this case. Simply put, no book or coach or will of my own will enable me to mature fully into the Christ-like person God has called me to be. I just can't do it, and until I admit this, God won't do it. With 613 laws in place by that time, a lawyer asked Jesus which commandment of the Law was greatest. Jesus replied by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4 – "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." He goes on to say that a second is like it, and then quotes Leviticus 19:18 – "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." When these verses are read in light of 1 John 4:19 – "We love because He first loved us" – the means to the end becomes obvious. Loving God and loving our neighbor, whomever he or she may be, can only happen when, and to the degree that, we allow God's love to flow in and through us by the power of His Holy Spirit. This harkens back to John 3:16, where Jesus gives us the starting point, which is God loving us, and us letting Him. Once again, the work is God's doing, while faith is our doing.

These five questions set the stage for what follows in this eight-part series, and you will find the answers to these questions imbedded in everything that follows. What a blessing and joy it is for me to be part of a spiritual family of brothers and sisters in Christ, which we call *The Church*. We are on a journey, not separately, but together, and in the company of our friend and brother, who is also our Savior and Lord, Jesus. Let's simply and freely let His love flow in us and through us, back to the Father, and out to everyone He brings into our lives.

The following outline lists the five existential questions and upcoming themes with Scripture references for the next seven parts in this series on *The Church*.

THE CHURCH – *oikos* – means *household, home, family*

– **Who are we?**

The body of Christ and individually members of it. 1 Corinthians 12:27

– **Why are we here?**

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son... John 3:16

– **What do we believe?**

Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God...have life in his name. John 20:31

– **Where are we going?**

...the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Ephesians 4:13

– **How do we get there?**

Love the Lord your God...love your neighbor. Matthew 22:37-39

- **Our Faith Statement:** 1 Corinthians 15:3-4

Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

- **Our Message:** Matthew 4:17,19

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.

- **Our Mandate:** Matthew 22:37-39

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

- **Our Mission:** Matthew 28:19-20

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

- **Our Model:** Acts 2:42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

- **Our Ministries:** 1 Corinthians 12:4-7

There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

- **Our Ministry:** John 8:29

I always do the things that are pleasing to him.

* References - English Standard Version (ESV)