

The Church: then where do I find it??

The church gathering work of the ascended Lord is catholic, spread over the entire world, active in any place, culture and time period. Our responsibility as people is to walk in step with our Savior and Lord in whatever locality He has placed us – and that's to say that we join the church as Christ is gathering it in our town. That leaves the pressing question: where is the church Christ is gathering? How can I find it?? Is any church in town *His* church?

Voice

The means Christ uses to gather His own is His voice. To the Jews Jesus said, *“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life”* (John 5:24). On another occasion He spoke of sheep who *“hear his voice”* and so follow when he calls. He identified Himself as *“the good shepherd”* of the flock (John 10:11), and added that He had *“other sheep”* who *“will listen to my voice,”* and as a result *“there will be one flock, one shepherd”* (10:16; cf vs 27). Accordingly, the apostle Paul stressed the role of the voice in Christ's church gathering work when He wrote, *“faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ”* (Romans 10:17). The *“hearing”* of the word assumes, of course, not its reading (edifying though that is) but its proclamation through voice. So Paul elsewhere gave the instruction to *“preach the word...; reprove, rebuke, and exhort with complete patience and teaching”* (2 Timothy 4:2).

Copycat

It was the spoken word that God used in the beginning to create the world (Genesis 1:3,6,9,etc). In keeping with the Creator's example, the creature God fashioned to image Him also could speak (cf Genesis 2:23). Not surprisingly, then, Satan used speech in his temptation of the woman (Genesis 3:1).

As the Lord God continues to use the voice in His work of renewing fallen sinners (for He sent out apostles to preach), so Satan continues to use speech to subvert God's work. The *“super-apostles”* who came to Corinth, much more skilled in speech than Paul was, were (he writes) *“false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light”* (2 Corinthians 11:5,13,14).

The point is simply this: not every voice is from the Good Shepherd; there are plenty of false shepherds (*“strangers”*, as Jesus calls them, cf John 10:5) who copycat the Lord's method of gathering His people. That reality means that one needs to do more than listen *for* a voice; one needs equally to listen *to* the voice to determine whether it makes the right sound. And that in turn means that one needs *“ears to hear”* (Mark 4:9).

Confusion

The need for *“ears to hear”* is highlighted by the multiple references in Scripture to illegitimate assemblies of the people of God. Consider the following:

- The people of God traveled from Mt Sinai to the Promised Land, and did so as one people. Yet at a certain moment *“Korah assembled all the congregation against them at the entrance of the tent of meeting”* (Numbers 16:19). The pronoun *“them”* is a reference to Moses and Aaron and those assembled with them. On this occasion, then, there were two assemblies, one under the leadership of Moses and Aaron and the other under the leadership of Korah. Both assemblies were made up of Israelites, that is, of people-of-God-by-covenant. But only one of these two

- assemblies-of-the-people-of-God was legitimate – as became evident when the ground opened up and devoured the other assembly (Numbers 16:31).
- The Lord God had ordained that His people gather periodically at the temple in Jerusalem (see Deuteronomy 12). After the division of the kingdom following the death of Solomon, however, King Jeroboam of the northern tribes was afraid that his people's travel to Jerusalem would prompt his subjects to turn back to Rehoboam king of Judah. So he built two places of worship in his kingdom, one in Dan in the far north and the other in Bethel toward the south, and then instructed his people to worship the Lord their God in these towns (1 Kings 12:26-30). The result is that there was an assembly of the people of God in Jerusalem, a second assembly of God's people in Bethel, and a third in Dan. The Lord, however, gathers one people and had instructed that that gathering occur in Jerusalem. The other two, consequently, were illegitimate assemblies of the people of God.
 - In his final words to the elders of Ephesus, Paul warned that "*from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them*" (Acts 20:30). There will, in other words, be two (groups of) leaders, each attracting Christian disciples to themselves. The result will be two assemblies of God's people, be it that the one involves twisting of the truth. Given that the Lord gathers *one* church, a second assembly as the apostle forecasts would be illegitimate-before-God.

How could the people of Numbers 16 and of 1 Kings 12 and of Acts 20 know which assembly was legitimate-before-God? Which was the one Christ was gathering – and hence the one they were to make a point of joining? In pursuit of answers to those questions, we'll turn now to consider in detail another assembly and counter-assembly of God's people-by-covenant.

Acts 2

"When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place" (Acts 2:1). The word 'they' refers to the 120 saints mentioned in Acts 1:15, and the 'one place' where they were gathered was a "*house*" (2:2). For the careful Bible reader, that text is highly surprising! God, after all, had specified in the Old Testament that at the end of the Feast of Weeks the people were to hold "*a holy convocation*" (Leviticus 23:21), and that "*holy*" convocation was invariably at the temple – which was the place the Lord had chosen "*to make his name dwell there*" (see Deuteronomy 16:11). The end of the seven-week Feast of Weeks was the 50th day, known as Pentecost (from the Greek word for 50), and so it was that the faithful in Jesus' day made it their business to be present in Jerusalem for this conclusion to the Feast of Weeks (see Acts 2:5-11). On "*the day of Pentecost*" the masses of Jerusalem were gathered together in the temple, in conformity with Old Testament instruction.

But, says Acts 2:1, the 120 disciples were *not* gathered with the rest of the people of God in the temple! Why not? Why were there *two* assemblies of God's people-by-covenant in Jerusalem that day – the big one in the temple and the small one in the house? Anyone feeling the need to make a choice as to which gathering of God's people he ought to join would, we'd say, obviously gravitate to the temple – not only because the crowd in the temple represented majority opinion, but also because they had tradition and history on their side. Given the presence of the *temple*, a "*holy convocation*" in a "*house*" was surely wrong.

But –and here is the point– it is the Lord Jesus Christ who gathers His church. And *He* (at least from human perspective) *had changed His place of work*. No, that's not surprising if only because (see above) there are *dynamics* in His labors. Allow me to elaborate.

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Departure

For years and centuries, the gospel of redemption from sin had been proclaimed in the temple through the sacrifices on the altar. Those sacrifices had repeatedly foreshadowed the work of *“the Lamb of God”* who would one day come to *“take away the sins of the world”* (John 1:29). This Lamb of God came in the person of Jesus Christ, who was sacrificed for sin outside Jerusalem on the cross of Calvary. When He died, the curtain in the temple was torn in two (Matthew 27:51) to show that the distance sin had created between God and man was now taken away. Because of His death there was no longer any need for further sacrifice for sin in the temple (Hebrews 10:10,18). The fact that the seamstresses repaired the torn curtain did not return the temple to its former task.

Further, the leadership of the temple had lost the right to speak in the name of God. Both during His ministry as well as during His trial, it was the chief priests and the elders who repeatedly rejected Jesus as the Christ and demanded His crucifixion. After Jesus’ resurrection, the temple leadership paid the soldiers to subvert the good news of Easter Sunday with the lie that Jesus’ disciples had stolen His body while they slept. The long and short: because of the unbelief in the temple, the Lord departed from the place where He had long lived with Israel; no longer was the temple the place where the Lord God caused His name to dwell.

New work place

The Lord’s people are to walk in step with where the Lord walks – and works. That is why the 120 on that Pentecost Day did not assemble with the crowds in the temple. Instead, they gathered together in another place – which in the providence of God was a house nearby. Any observer wanting to choose whether to join the traditional assembly in the temple or the novel (counter) assembly in the house had to take seriously the progress in Christ’s work of redemption – and walk in step with Christ where He was now walking. The person who had his eye on what God was doing and understood the significance of Calvary and the torn curtain and the hardness of the temple leadership could figure out with no great difficulty where the Lord wanted him to be.

Clarity

As the hours and the days and the weeks went passed, the matter invariably became clearer to the godly observer. Despite the progress in the history of redemption sacrifices continued to burn in the temple foreshadowing a Messiah who was still expected to come one day. In their explanation of the sacrifices, priests and Levites invariably denied the work Jesus Christ accomplished on Calvary.

In the house nearby, however, Peter preached his Pentecost sermon, telling the crowds of the fulfillment of those Old Testament sacrifices through the death of the Christ *“you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men,”* the one God in turn *“raised”* from the dead (Acts 2:23,24). The contrast in messages could not be greater. In the months that followed, Peter and the other disciples repeated that glorious good news with more straightforward preaching (see Acts 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 5:21; 5:29-32).

Nor could the contrast be greater in the respective responses to the messages. In the temple things continued as they’d been going for years. But at the house down the street Peter’s hearers *“were cut to the heart”* and they repented of their sins and were baptized for the forgiveness of those sins (Acts 2:37,38,41). More, people who 7 weeks ago had joined the masses to cry out to *“crucify him”* (Mark 15:14) now *“were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need”* (Acts 2:45). How quickly and how wonderfully the fruits of the Spirit replaced the works of the flesh

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(Galatians 5:19-23) – a change not happening in the hearts of those frequenting the gatherings in the temple. What did that say about where the ascended Lord was working?!

Sacraments

Further, it is worth noting that in that house on Pentecost Day sacraments were being used to confirm the gospel to particular sinners. The crowd to whom Peter preached, Jews as they were, were invariably already circumcised as a sign of God's covenant with them. But Peter insisted not only that they "*repent*", but also that they "*be baptized ... in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins*" (Acts 2:38). The Old Testament picture of washing as sign of cleansing from sin (see Leviticus ??; Ezekiel 36:?:; Matthew 3:6,11) should be applied to these repentant sinners as reassurance that their sins were in fact washed away. He added the promise, "*You will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit,*" and explained the reason for the gift, "*for the promise is for you and for your children and for all who are far off...*" (Acts 2:39). Those words echo God's promise to Abraham, "*I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you*" (Genesis 17:7). That old-time covenant promise, Peter insisted, remained valid for the people of the new assembly in the house, and the assurance it was really for them lay now no longer in their circumcision but in their baptism – as sign that their sins were truly washed away in God's sight. So the God who had departed from the temple would, in the Holy Spirit, live in these believers. It's no surprise, then, that Paul later told the believers of Corinth that they were "*God's temple*" (1 Corinthians 3:16; 6:19).

Again, that second assembly emanating from the house developed a habit in their midst different from what was commonly happening amongst those gathering at the temple. Peter had already promised that they would "*receive the gift of the Holy Spirit*" (Acts 2:38). Consistent with that promise is the note of Scripture that "*they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.... 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*" (Acts 2:42,44,45). Not only is this vibrant communion of saints encouraging to see, but the "*breaking of bread*" is at minimum an oblique reference to the Lord's Supper. The focus of the crowd lay very much on Christ's body broken for their sins. This stood in marked contrast with what was happening amongst those frequenting the assembly in the temple.

Discipline

We do not know where the crowd of Pentecost Day assembled in the days and weeks that followed. Wherever that may have been, it's clear that those who belonged to that second assembly had no tolerance for blatant sin in their midst. In an effort to make themselves look better to the public, two of those who commonly assembled with the second crowd decided together to deceive the brethren about the amount of money they received for their property. The Lord God used the opportunity to show that, as He is holy, His church is holy too. Scarcely had Ananias uttered his lie, and he fell dead. Sapphire shared his deceit, and instantly fell dead too (Acts 5:1-11). When the disciples realized that not everyone was being included in "*the daily distribution*", they immediately set about correcting the weakness with the appointment of seven deacons (Acts 6:1-6). Here was an earnest effort to be the "holy" people God wanted His own to be.

The other assembly

Meanwhile, those of the temple continued to browbeat the apostles in an effort to silence them. They "*arrested*" Peter and John, "*put them in custody,*" "*charged them not to*

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“speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus” and *“further threatened them”* before they finally *“let them go”* (Acts 4:3,18,21). Another time the temple leadership, *“filled with jealousy ... arrested the apostles and put them in the public prison”* (Acts 5:17,18). After an angel of the Lord set them free the temple authorities again had them hauled before the council who had them beaten and *“charged them not to speak in the name of Jesus”* (Acts 5:27,40). When Stephen opened the Scriptures for them they were so *“enraged”* that *“they ground their teeth at him..., stopped their ears..., cast him out of the city and stoned him”* (Acts 7:54,57,58). On that same day *“a great persecution”* arose *“against the church in Jerusalem”* so that the saints *“were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria”* (Acts 8:1).

Meanwhile, back at the temple the priests did not proclaim the gospel of redemption in Jesus Christ. They continued to insist that the boys of Israel were circumcised (despite Christ having put an end to the shedding of blood at means of reconciling sinners to God) and continued to teach too that all Israelites should sacrifice annually the Passover Lamb.

Conclusion

Putting it all together, was it hard for the person who walked in step with Jesus Christ to know which of the two assemblies he ought to join? Surely, it is evident that the answer isn't so hard.

It leaves us with the confession as the church has worded it over the years and centuries in Article 29 of the *Belgic Confession*:

We believe that we ought to discern diligently and very carefully from the Word of God what is the true church, for all sects which are in the world today claim for themselves the name of church.¹ We are not speaking here of the hypocrites, who are mixed in the church along with the good and yet are not part of the church, although they are outwardly in it.² We are speaking of the body and the communion of the true church which must be distinguished from all sects that call themselves the church.

The true church is to be recognized by the following marks:

It practices the pure preaching of the gospel.³ It maintains the pure administration of the sacraments as Christ instituted them.⁴ It exercises church discipline for correcting and punishing sins.⁵ In short, it governs itself according to the pure Word of God,⁶ rejecting all things contrary to it⁷ and regarding Jesus Christ as the only Head.⁸ Hereby the true church can certainly be known and no one has the right to separate from it.

Those who are of the church may be recognized by the marks of Christians. They believe in Jesus Christ the only Saviour,⁹ flee from sin and pursue righteousness,¹⁰ love the true God and their neighbour¹¹ without turning to the right or left, and crucify their flesh and its works.¹² Although great weakness remains in them, they fight against it by the Spirit all the days of their life.¹³ They appeal constantly to the blood, suffering, death, and obedience of Jesus Christ, in whom they have forgiveness of their sins through faith in Him.¹⁴

The false church assigns more authority to itself and its ordinances than to the Word of God. It does not want to submit itself to the yoke of Christ.¹⁵ It does not administer the sacraments as Christ commanded in His Word, but adds to them and subtracts from them as it pleases. It bases itself more on men than on Jesus Christ. It persecutes those who live holy lives according to the Word of God and who rebuke the false church for its sins, greed, and idolatries.¹⁶

These two churches are easily recognized and distinguished from each other.