

(Following is Chapter 2 of the book **“The Simple/House Church Revolution”** by Roger Thoman. The entire book is available as a free download here: <http://www.simplechurchrevolution.com/>)

## CHAPTER TWO

# DEFINING “CHURCH” (WEBSTER HAS IT WRONG)

Church according to Miriam-Webster’s online dictionary:

- 1: a building for public and especially Christian worship
- 2: the clergy or officialdom of a religious body
- 3: a body or organization of religious believers: as a: the whole body of Christians b: denomination <the Presbyterian church> c: congregation
- 4: a public divine worship <goes to church every Sunday>

Webster defines church according to the way this word is used *today*. I was taught this same definition as a little boy when I would put my hands together and recite the rhyme: “Here is the church, and here is the steeple; open the door and here are all the people.”

Jesus, however, introduced the term “church” with a very different meaning in mind. He used a word “ekklesia” that simply described a group or assembly of people. This is the original definition of the word. He described “church” as those people who were following Him — people walking in allegiance to him. People. His followers. Nothing more than that.

Jesus did not spend much time describing how to organize his people together or how to do meetings. Rather, his focus was on a lifestyle of loving others and obeying Him: “Go into all the world...” “Let your light shine...” “Do what you see the Father

doing..." "Love one another..." Church, as defined by Jesus, was simply his followers living life for and with him.

Over the years, however, the word "church" began to include the many structures and forms that we added to the original meaning:

- Public meeting places (buildings or storefronts)
- Organizations of believers who get together to be led by a worship team and preached to by a pastor
- Denominations that we join

But, as John Eldredge reminds us:

Church is not a building. Church is not an event that takes place on Sundays. I know, it's how we've come to think of it. 'I go to First Baptist.' 'We are members of St. Luke's.' 'Is it time to go to church?' Much to our surprise, that is not how the Bible uses the term. Not at all.<sup>1</sup>

No. Not at all. Church is God's people—those who are choosing to live life with Jesus... 24/7. That is it. Nothing more.

But don't God's people gather together? Yes. We do see gatherings take place in Scripture. Many gatherings. Most often informal and simple. Normally in homes (Romans 16:5). Everyone participated (1 Corinthians 14:26). They functioned as spiritual families that cared deeply for one another (Romans 12:10). Yet the focus of the church (God's people) was a lifestyle of Jesus-following, rather than organizing events, attending programs, or joining organizations.

Perhaps the best way to describe the church of the New Testament is as small, vibrant, caring families of believers who are loving others and reproducing themselves into every corner of the world.

## **The Things I Learned About Church From Bible College**

I attended a Bible College as a brand new Christian hungry to live a life useful to God. I loved reading the stories of the disciples following Jesus, traveling with him, ministering with him, doing miracles alongside of Jesus as he poured out his life for others. I thought it was fantastic. I enjoyed studying the book of Acts and seeing God's people going throughout the world, filled by the Spirit, walking in God's purposes and power. But, as a subtext, I was also taught to "do church" in Bible college. It was not a specific class. There was no text book. I simply learned to follow "how it was done" by those around me. *Frankly, the way I learned to "do church" did not look much at all like the lives of the early disciples that I was studying and wanting to be like.*

Nevertheless, by the time I felt called to pastor a church, I no longer questioned how church was done. We started with a building and a core group of Christians. We invited, and planned, and organized, and put together Sunday events. We built more buildings and started more services to invite people to. We developed programs for young and old, men and women, married and divorced. We hired staff and we organized ministry teams.

Without realizing it, we were following human traditions for church life that were developed over the centuries: cathedrals, pulpit-led services, pews, order-of-service, etc. All of these things may be useful in their place (God can use anything), but they have no place in the basic definition of "church."

Sadly, as the church has adopted more and more traditions and become more and more institutionalized, it has become largely ineffective in its impact on earth. In the western world, where we have created the best organizational church systems that exist, Christianity is declining. In contrast, in parts of India and China where the expression of church is largely organic, simple, and fluid, the church is flourishing.

Our longing is to see the church restored to its essence of life and vitality so that she becomes the full expression of Christ's

power and love on earth. This is the great hope of God's kingdom coming to influence, save, and redeem a lost planet. Priscilla Shirer made this comment:

In the first century in Palestine Christianity was a community of believers. Then Christianity moved to Greece and became a philosophy. Then it moved to Rome and became an institution. Then it moved to Europe and became a culture. And then it moved to America and became a business. We need to get back to being a healthy, vibrant community of true followers of Jesus.<sup>2</sup>

### **Being Church**

My Filipino friend, Molong Nacua, wrote an excellent article entitled "Being Church" that reminds us of the true meaning of "church:"

Church is where Christ lives, not the place where we meet. It is Christ-empowered people, a kingdom of priests for the purpose of winning against the works of the devil and establishing God's Kingdom (1 Cor. 3:17; Matt. 18:19; Ex. 19:6)... Christianity is not about doing church, but being the church. Church is not some place to go to participate in, but it is about being who you are in Christ and thus experiencing His real life in you. Your Christianity was never defined by attending a particular church. It is defined by Christ in you. In other words, you are a Christian 24/7, not because you participate in a two-hour worship service, but because Christ lives in you every minute of every day.

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<sup>1</sup> Eldredge, John, *Waking the Dead*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2003, p. 192

<sup>2</sup> Shirer, Priscilla, speaking at a Christian Bookseller's Association meeting