

What is Church?

CALL	reminds us we are	CHOSEN
CONFESSION	renews us as God's	REDEEMED
CONSECRATION	grows us as	HOLY DISCIPLES
COMMUNION	unites us as	JOYFUL FAMILY
COMMISSION	sends us as	SERVANT MISSIONARIES

PART FOUR: JOYFUL FAMILY

JESUS IS GOOD NEWS

What would be your perfect world? Tyranny and war would cease. Rivers and seas would be cleansed of all pollution. Poverty and hunger would be history. Friendships and families would never break down. Perhaps death itself would be banished.

We long for a better world and that longing is a clue that this world – the only world we know – is destined for something more. Disease, decay and death are found everywhere in nature but somehow we do not want to view them as natural.

The Bible describes a ‘groaning’ that fills our hearts, a ‘groaning’ that wants to see the world liberated and brought into freedom and glory (see Romans 8). The prophets of the Old Testament spoke of a day when God would come, when true justice would end all injustice, when tears and death would be no more. They spoke of a New Creation. This was no escape from this world to a cloudy heaven full of harp-playing angels. The heavens and the earth would be renewed and united.

Jesus came to us: God became flesh and dwelt among us. The God of heaven and the dust of the earth were united in one man, Jesus Christ. When Jesus died and rose again a part of this creation died and then burst through death into eternal resurrection life, full of glory and immortality. The New Creation was born out of the womb of the tomb. As Jesus ate with his amazed disciples he did so in a body that would never perish, spoil or fade away.

Where the head leads, the body will follow. Jesus’ resurrection is the guarantee that his body – the church – will be raised to life. And where the church goes, all creation will follow. When Jesus returns the power of his resurrection will bring all creation into New Creation glory. Heaven and earth will be united. God will dwell among his people. This will be the home of justice and righteousness. This future – the perfect future – is for all who are joined to Jesus Christ.

When people believe and are united to Christ, there we find New Creation. In baptism we are taken through death and raised to new life with Christ. The Spirit is given to us, an unbreakable bond between believers and their inheritance.

Church is a New Creation community. We are called to be a foretaste, a preview of the future. In Christ and by the Spirit our lives are changed so that church becomes a community where relationships are healed, where we learn to practice justice, where we live as citizens of heaven – a colony of heaven on earth. At the Lord’s Table we taste the world to come: we gather as the Father’s family to be given the life of Christ by the Spirit and to celebrate with joy the Saviour who died, who rose again and who will one day return in glory.

PREPARATION: LUKE CHAPTER 24

Jesus, risen from the dead, meets and eats with his disciples. As you read the passage, consider these questions:

- What does Jesus say about the importance and the focus of the Scriptures?
- Describe the emotional journey that Cleopas and the other disciple goes through. What changes them?
- Christ is about to return to heaven: how will Christians 'see' him and recognise him after his departure?
- How does this Sunday set the pattern for future Sundays?
- What mission / task does Jesus give to his followers?

WHO ARE WE: JOYFUL FAMILY

Ephesians 4:25 – 5:2

- These verses describe life in the church, "the body" (v25). What vision of church life is being expressed in this passage?
- Notice the references to words and speech. What do we learn about the importance of the way we talk to one another in the church family?
- What positive actions are mentioned in these verses?
- How important is forgiveness? How is Jesus our example?

WORSHIP AND IDENTITY: COMMUNION – God feeds and unites us

The Lord's table is a joyful feast where the family of God are fed and united as one body. This is Jesus' table and we receive his life in the bread and wine.

At the table we:

- **REJOICE** in our adoption as sons and daughters of God
- **RECOGNISE** one another as members of Christ's body
- are **REASSURED** by the Spirit of our future hope and inheritance

BIBLE MEDITATION AND PRAYER: PSALM 23

Meditating on the Bible is about careful reading and reflection on a Bible passage, chewing it in your mind, then responding with prayer to your heavenly Father.

First: read the Psalm a few times. Think about what the Psalm is saying – what it teaches about God, about the LORD Jesus, about the world, about the church.

Second: Pray with thanksgiving to God. Praise him. Marvel at what he has revealed, acknowledge the wonder that God has spoken to you in this passage of the Bible.

Third: Confess your sins to God. The passage may reveal your sin and failure, or expose the shortcomings of the church (local, denominational, national, etc).

Fourth: Make your requests to God. What do you need to ask for? How do you need to change? Perhaps the passage prompts you to pray for other people or churches.

This Psalm expresses trust in the Good Shepherd, through good times and tough times. Despite the enemies, God prepares a table for his people. How does the Lord's Supper help us trust God despite the 'enemies' we face?

THE LORD'S PRAYER

The flow of the Lord's Prayer takes us through the shape of the Worship service.

"Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us"

- Bread and forgiveness are brought together in a meal of unity: "we who are many are one body, for we all share the one loaf" (1 Corinthians 10:17)
- If the Father gave us his Son to be the Bread of Life, then we can trust him to be the provider and sustainer of our lives
- Communion speaks powerfully of our forgiveness through Jesus' blood. It therefore teaches us how to practice forgiveness

TRUTH IN PRACTICE

There are many implications of the wonderful reality that we are HOLY DISCIPLES. We are focusing on these three areas (Family, Money, Mission) because these are parts of church life that need strengthening at this time.

FAMILY AND CHILDREN

Families who come to Jesus may be full of mess and dysfunction but they belong to the family of God. Baptised children may not understand all that is going on in worship but they need to grow up knowing they belong to the church family. Like adults they are invited to keep on trusting Jesus and keep on turning from sin. Like adults we want them to know, with deep joy, that Jesus died for them. They can sense they belong to the Body of Christ long before they know what that means. From a young age baptised children should receive the bread and wine of Holy Communion so that they know they are included because of Jesus, not excluded because of their level of intellectual understanding. Children and adults alike have a lifetime of growing in an increasingly profound realisation that Jesus nourishes and refreshes their souls for eternal life with his crucified body and poured-out blood.

If the centre of worship is God's Word, the climax of worship is gathering at God's Table. There we discover that our true family is our church family. Biological families are important but Jesus wants people to have a deeper loyalty to his family (Luke 7:20-21). Water is thicker than blood: the unity that comes in the waters of baptism is stronger than the unity that comes from biological connection. So children need to experience the reality of church as an extended family. They will thrive when they know the prayer, encouragement and godly example of spiritual aunts and uncles, grandparents and siblings. In the same way, people in your church family will thrive when they sense a belonging to your family. God is "father to the fatherless, a defender of widows... God sets the lonely in families" (Psalm 68:5-6) and your family can make that a reality to others. Your children will be shaped for life by God's goodness and love as your family connects with church family.

MONEY

The apostle Paul wrote “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich” (2 Corinthians 8:9). In Holy Communion this message is spoken powerfully to us. Jesus went to the cross, giving his body over to death and shedding his blood for us. Truly we can say: he held nothing back. Through his death we are rich: we come to Communion as children of God. By faith we receive the body and blood of Christ as we eat the bread and drink the wine – nothing is more valuable! Our generosity is inspired by the generosity of God’s mercy.

Communion tells us we are family. If Christ gave everything to make us family, we are called to give in order to support and love our church family. “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?” (1 John 3:16-17).

MISSION

Through Communion we learn to become people of hospitality and hope. Both are key aspects of being a church that reveals the kingdom of God to this world.

At the Lord’s Table the poorest and weakest are exalted to sit at the King’s Table. Sinners commune with God and outcasts are fed with the life of Christ. Status, power and wealth make no difference – all believers are adopted as equal sons and daughters of God, brothers and sisters in Christ. With this experience of hospitality we become hospitable people. The lonely are welcomed. Those at the bottom of society are raised to the heights. Our own tables can become places of divine hospitality. Jesus encouraged his followers to express the welcome and hospitality that we have found in his kingdom (see Luke 14:1-24). Someone’s journey to the Lord’s Table could begin with an invitation to your table.

Communion is a vision of the future when we feast with the Lord in glory. No wonder it is often called *Eucharist*, meaning *Thanksgiving*. Whatever our trials in life Christians can say “the best is yet to come”. By the help of the Holy Spirit this hope affects our whole life. Even if we are threatened and persecuted, even in the face of death, we know the risen Christ is Lord. When people ask us for the reason for our joy and hope, we answer “Jesus died and is alive again. He has given me a future that is absolutely secure” (compare 1 Peter 3:13-16 with 1 Peter 1:3-9).

UNDERSTANDING WORSHIP: THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IN SUMMARY

The whole Christian life is summarised and recapitulated when our worship is structured according to the five Cs.

The official beginning of the Christian life is **baptism** when we are united with Christ through faith, responding to God's CALL and joining God's chosen people.

United to Jesus, the Righteous One, we are declared righteous: **justification**. The act of CONFESSION declares again that we are forgiven sinners, people who have been clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

Having become Christians we have a life-long task of **sanctification** as God the Spirit, through the Word, transforms us to become like Jesus. We are CONSECRATED.

One day we will be **glorified**. On death we enter into God's glory but continue to wait for the final day when Jesus Christ is revealed to all of creation. Then we will feast at the wedding supper of the Lamb. Our COMMUNION with God and his church will be made perfect.

However, we are not yet there. Gathering as church at the Lord's Supper is a taste of glory but that future – the final Day of the Lord – is still ahead of us. So we are sent out into the world with our COMMISSION, which is renewed at the end of each service, because the world needs to hear the good news of Jesus.

Here is the life of a believer in summary:

Baptism → Justification → Sanctification → Glorification

The central part of the service – CONSECRATION – is not simply the sermon. Other parts of the service, not always present each week, teach us about the Christian life.

- The Creed often follows the sermon. God has spoken and "faith comes by hearing" (Romans 10:17) so we declare that faith with a creed. We are meant to grow to understand truth (summarised in the creed) and grow in unity with the wider *catholic* (i.e. universal) church.
- Prayer is faith in action, so it is good for the intercessions to follow the sermon as we seek God's help to carry out his will on earth as it is in heaven. Praying for others shows that we are a *kingdom of priests* to the world.
- Times of singing show that we are a people of praise and music, delighting in what Jesus has done, sometimes lamenting this broken world in which we live.
- A collection or offering is an act of honouring God with all he has given us. The fruit of our work and wages is returned to God to be used for his purposes, while we are reminded that our employment and work matters to God. Through our gifts are whole lives are presented to the living God.