

"Does Jesus Think This Group is a Church?": Defining and Pursuing Church Identity and Health

By Howard Bell

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Helping groups of believers identify and function as churches is a key milestone in church planting among the least reached. In my experience, asking certain key questions is the simplest and most reproducible way to fruitfully facilitate this transition and growth process. One question in particular provokes fruitful discussion, a question I have asked dozens of times to people from various backgrounds: Syrians, Yemenis, Bosnians, Albanians, African Americans, suburban whites, and South Asians. "Does Jesus think this group is a church?" I ask with genuine curiosity and a desire to help them explore their own understanding and move forward as a group. Will they commit to growing into a healthy church? Or will they remain a Bible study, a seekers group, a cell group, a missional community, or one of the many other types of gatherings that are not explicitly "church"?

About 10 years ago on a video call, my mentor Chuck asked me this question for the first time, launching me into a deeper understanding of what church is and of my own discipleship community. After much discussion and reading several passages of Scripture including Matthew

18:20 and Acts 2:42–47, Chuck asked a follow-up question: “Are you willing to commit to being a healthy church together?”

Through years of coaching emerging groups and seeing many grow into healthy churches, I have grown to see the genius behind the question, “Does Jesus think this group is a church?” The question is not about what we think, but about what Jesus thinks. It puts the emphasis not on our opinions, but on our authorities—the Holy Scriptures and the Holy Spirit, through whom we have the mind of the Messiah. “Does Jesus think this group is a church?” moves a group towards the right discussion—a discussion about what our authorities say and who we are as a corporate body.

It is okay to respond “Yes” or “No” to the question; the discussion that follows is more important than the simple one-word answer. That discussion, if fruitful, can lead to the next question: “*Are we willing to make the commitment to be church together?*” If a group discussed giving, then they know that giving is part of that commitment in the future, if not now. If they discussed elders or leadership, then elders and leadership are part of that commitment in the future, if not now. These questions are more than just about our practice and discipleship; these questions get into our ecclesiology and our definitions of what church is and should be.

Identity in Christ Applied Corporately

If I ask a believer from the Global North how important our identity in Christ is, I can almost guarantee that they will affirm its importance, perhaps citing key Scriptures like 1 Pet. 2:9. Most of our discussions and resources about identity in Christ are primarily about individual identity, but 1 Pet. 2:9 and many other passages are actually about God’s people, the church, and our *corporate* identity in Christ: “But you (*plural*) are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”

Discussing the term “church” (*ekklesia* in Greek) is beyond the scope of this article, but it is noncontroversial to note that the term meant a gathering, and in the New Testament it usually refers to the gathering or community of God’s people (Bauer 2001, 303–304). We need to rightly apply many of the verses and practical lessons we have learned about individual identity in Christ to our corporate identity in Christ as the church, the people of God.

When I teach about church planting, I like to get a volunteer (let’s call her “Shelly”) and place them in the middle of the room. I explain to my class: “Shelly is a new believer. But is she a ‘saint,’ one of God’s holy ones as defined by Paul in Ephesians 1:1?” The audience will unanimously nod. “But wait,” I say teasingly, “to be a healthy believer, she needs to read her Bible regularly. She is not really a saint yet. First, she must read her Bible regularly. And wait,” I continue, “she does not give regularly. Every saint should give, so she is not *really* a saint yet.” People naturally squirm at such claims.

We would never publicly speak of someone’s individual identity in Christ in this way because we know that identity is not earned; it is given. Forcing a new believer to perform to attain their identity and acceptance is wrong. It is so wrong that some would call it false teaching, a false gospel, or even spiritual abuse. Most of us have felt the sting of that error. Yet we often struggle to recognize when we make the same error about corporate identity in Christ.

Some coaches tell emerging gatherings of believers that first they must attain certain marks of maturity or health before they can be called a church. Some tell them that church is defined by adherence to certain standards or having certain elements present in a gathering. Doing this would be approaching sanctification backwards. It would be telling people to earn their health, maturity, or holiness.

In individual discipleship and counseling, we affirm what God has done in individuals’ lives, the gifts he has given, and the work he has

accomplished. We encourage new believers to grow into all the fullness of Christ because they are already children of God. In corporate discipleship and in working toward healthy churches, we must do the same. We must affirm what God has done in the life of the body, the gifts he has given the body of Christ, and the work He has accomplished. We should encourage them to grow into all the fullness of Christ because they are already the family of God.

Identity comes first, and part of that identity is that we are part of a whole, a member of the body of Christ, a royal priesthood, and a holy nation that is God's church.

Corporate Identity in Action

If identity comes first, then we are better able to activate these truths by encouraging the community of believers to fully engage in who God has called them to be. God has made us a holy priesthood, so we should act like it, living as priests in the kingdom of God. God made us His church, so we should act like his church, doing what the Bible teaches churches to do.

But church identity comes before church activity. If a gathering of believers thinks of themselves as a church, they will have greater motivation to "live out" and "live up to" to their identity as the church. If a gathering of believers thinks of themselves merely as a Bible study or missional community, they may not feel obligated to live out all that the Scriptures teach about the identity and functions of the church.

I am not making an argument about words or nomenclature per se. It does not matter so much what word you use but what your practice is and what it communicates about church identity. Whatever word your translation consistently uses for *ekklesia* is the word you should ask gatherings of believers about, as that is the word they will encounter in the Bible and can identify with.

The Scriptures do not refer to "Bible studies" or "prayer meetings" or "cell groups" or "missional communities," as such. I am sure that the

things those words describe were practiced in the New Testament, but they were done as functions of a local “church.” The church met for varied reasons, but it was always as the church—the body of Christ.

Every believer is a member of the universal church and ideally a part of a local church. Not every gathering needs to develop into a healthy church, but some of the Scriptures’ commands are unlikely to be fulfilled outside of local church participation. Do we give? Do we submit to leaders (Heb. 13:17)? Do we gather with believers regularly (Heb. 10:25)? Do we partake in the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor. 11:23–24)? There is no discipleship outside of community, and the Bible calls God’s community of faith “church” (Addison 2012, 51). Most will find it necessary to gather with local believers in a gathering that functions as church to fulfill these commands; and the best way to get a group started in functioning as a church is to call it a church.

Without church identity there may not be much motivation to grow into full health and maturity. If our gathering is just a Bible study, why do the work it takes to become church? If our gathering is merely a “missional community,” why have Scriptural leadership that meets the qualification for biblical elders? But if our gathering is a church, we have clear prescriptions from Scripture on those decisions.

Committing to Healthy Church

A co-worker and I were going out together to share the good news about Jesus with our friends and neighbors when we met Melanie. Melanie was recovering from drug and alcohol abuse and came from a non-evangelical background but had some familiarity with Jesus. She loved the stories about Jesus that we verbally shared with her, and we asked if we could come to her house to study the Scriptures more. She agreed and introduced us to Stephan, the man she was living with and the father of her son. Stephan was also recovering from drugs but still abusing alcohol. We began to read the Bible together using an inductive Bible study method (Discovery Bible Study).

Then Arnold, who had recently been released from prison, joined the Bible study. He had a transforming spiritual experience with Jesus in prison but was struggling with relapse into drugs and alcohol. He was still full of zeal to share the gospel though, and he and Melanie continued to share with friends and neighbors. A few months into our study, I got a phone call that the neighbor had come over high on cocaine, and they needed help with him. The neighbor, Pedro, was a follower of a different world religion and had recently been released from prison. A few months later he repented and confessed his faith in the good news of Jesus.

We asked this group of believers, many of whom were still struggling with besetting sins, whether they believed the group that gathered in their house was a church. I do not know if I have ever seen a group affirm church identity more quickly than they did. This was their community of faith, full of people like them, in a building that was theirs, and Jesus met with them. Why couldn't it be church?

We asked them if they would commit to growing into a healthy church. They said yes, agreeing to do their best to obey Jesus' commands for church as they encountered them. In the months ahead we confessed our sins to one another, ate together, took the Lord's Supper together, and baptized new believers. It was both a thrilling season and a difficult one as different people came in and out of the church, and different people fell back into drugs.

I tell this story because it is one of the stories that is closest to my heart and mind. For me as a believer, it was one of the most transforming church experiences I have ever had. The story does not necessarily end well though. We never got to healthy leadership and appointing elders. Like many churches, our church had believers who struggled with sins and addictions, though perhaps in more open ways than some. We buried one of our members who died because of an overdose. Another member went back to prison. Stephan and Melanie still want to follow Jesus, but the church went in different directions, some people falling away for a season and some joining other churches.

Some people view such churches as lacking longevity in contrast to traditional churches. However, it is important to recognize that traditional churches that meet in buildings are also subject to turnover and change. Because the building stays the same everyone thinks it is the same church, but, in reality, people come and go, and pastors come and go. In many cases, it is the same building with different people. House churches may be affected by turnover in more visible ways, but both traditional churches and house churches are subject to change and turnover with the passing of time.

Often, I think there is another question hiding beneath the surface. Are these churches good enough, healthy enough to be “real” churches? Were Stephan, Melanie, Arnold, Pedro, Laija, Neil, and I meeting together good enough to be a “real” church? To me that is like asking if they were good enough to be “real” believers. No, they were not. Jesus died to make them so.

Apostolic Example

Often, I try to turn these questions around. Was the church in Corinth good enough, healthy enough to be a “real” church? What about the church in Galatia? They had sexual immorality, false teaching, greed, favoritism, inappropriate use of spiritual gifts, legalism, and many other sins in their congregations. Yet Paul writes beautiful things about their identity in Christ even as he warns them. He then uses the truth about their identity in Christ as leverage for teaching that will bring them to maturity. Paul did not use many of the methods Westerners use to try to prevent false teaching, such as demanding certain levels of education from leaders, or taking much more time to identify church. I suggest we dive back into the Scriptures to discover why, but one of my own conclusions is that Paul valued corporate identity in Christ and the priesthood of all believers more than many modern church cultures do.

A good question to ask of all our methods is, “Does this fit apostolic example?” Principles are eternal, but methods vary according to context.

While I see the apostles constantly talking about church identity and corporate identity of Christ in the epistles, we do not get a clear picture in Acts of when exactly the apostles decided to call a gathering a church.

One helpful example is the church in Thessalonica. Acts 17:1-9 records Paul's visit there, which is estimated to have been in 49-52 AD (Fee 2009, 38). Acts states that Paul stayed in Thessalonica for three sabbaths before fleeing by night, which meant that he spent about three to four weeks there proclaiming the gospel and discipling new believers. When he reached Athens, he sent Timothy to check on the Thessalonian believers (1 Thess. 3:1-2). First Thessalonians is widely considered the earliest of Paul's epistles, being commonly dated to the same year of his visit and before he returned to the area during his second missionary journey (ibid). First Thessalonians 1:1 and the rest of the epistle are not bashful about identifying the believers in Thessalonica as an *ekklesia* or church. It is possible that Paul calls them a church after only being with them for a few weeks, or that they were identified as a church at some point during Timothy's several months of ministry to them.

In contrast, while Paul spent just a few weeks in Thessalonica, he spent around three years in Ephesus (Acts 20:31). It seems unlikely to me that he waited for three years to ascribe church identity to the believers in Ephesus, because of his significant ministry partnership there and the fact that it was one of the few places where he met pre-existing disciples (Acts 19:1). It seems likely to me that Paul stayed in Ephesus as long as he did because it became a hub through which the gospel spread throughout all of Asia (Acts 19:10). While we might say it took Paul anywhere from three weeks to three years to plant a church, we should recognize that Paul was not hesitant to give church identity to gatherings of new believers.

What Counts and is Counted?

In my current context in South Asia, church identity is less of a struggle than it has been in Western contexts. The people group I work with has fewer church traditions, less education, and more input from

workers with a multiplication and outreach mindset. When the question “Does Jesus think this group is a church?” arises, they assess it simply with the information they have from the New Testament. They have less cultural baggage to bring to the table. On the other hand, “Will we commit together to being a healthy church?” seems to be as hard a question here as it is in the West. People take it seriously. Some believers do not want to commit to meeting together regularly. Some want a separate meeting space that seems more permanent and more secure. Others must travel a long distance to come. However, these challenges exist with most methods of church planting. For me and my colleagues in South Asia, this shift from thinking “Are we a church or not?” to “Will we commit to healthy church or not?” has been consistently fruitful both in planting more churches and planting churches with an intention to grow into healthy church.

In this context, cross-cultural laborers are much more likely to worry about the definition of church and what counts as church. I have heard some laborers who want certain marks of maturity before they will count it as a church regardless of what the church members or leaders say. I have heard others count every group that meets at least once a month with more than three people as a church regardless of what the participants say. My own method is to count groups that identify as church as “church.” Do they call themselves a church? If so, I do too. It is possible that I would find out more information that would lead me to believe they were actually not a church, such as a commitment to false teaching, but I take their claim in good faith unless I have a reason not to.

There are difficult cases where it is hard to know whether Jesus thinks a gathering is a church or not. A friend recently asked me, “What if only two people were meeting together calling themselves a church?” That seems unlikely to happen, but if they call themselves a church, I would not contradict them. I would say that it is unhealthy, and I would want to help them grow in health as soon as possible. I see no clear Scripture that says two people gathering cannot be a church, and walking

with such believers and encouraging them toward healthy church can be more effective than splitting hairs and imposing a uniform church definition. I want to encourage believers to find the answers from the Scriptures for themselves, and I do think our intention to be a church matters for church identity in practice. If people are a church in the eyes of Jesus, but do not know it and believe it, they will struggle to be a healthy church. My goal is to move the conversation on from “Are we a church, or aren’t we?” to “Are we a healthy church?” It is this latter question which is more important and more fruitful in helping groups commit to and pursue healthy church.

Will This Work?

Many will wonder if these questions would work for them in their context. I cannot answer for certain, and methods need to be adapted to specific contexts. However, corporate identity in Christ and the priesthood of all believers are principles drawn from Scripture, and whatever method we use must be consistent with those truths and values.

A friend of mine, Andrew, once told a story from his hockey-playing days. He was one of the best skaters on his team, so he was surprised when the coach called him over and told him, “I have a problem with the way you skate.”

“Okay,” he said. “What’s the problem?”

“You never fall down,” his coach said. “If you never fall, it means you aren’t trying hard enough. You are trying to be perfect.”

The coach’s lesson has a lot to teach us about ministry and church planting. We need to fail more. We need to be willing to try more things and be biased towards action. Failing in ministry can produce bad fruit, and it can hurt people. But “failures” in ministry and church planting can also produce great fruit. That is part of why I told the story about the church at Melanie and Stephan’s house. That church does not meet

anymore. It folded or “failed” by traditional human standards. But the lessons learned in that church live on in the people who were a part of it because God was at work. They did not come away from that experience burned or hurt. They came away from it as better disciples of Jesus, and even though they are parts of different communities of faith now, I do not regret that church plant or its failure.

If you want to know if these questions will work, you must ask them. Not once, but many times. When it comes to sharing the good news about Jesus, we should know by now that it requires many shares to see fruit. Sharing once without visible fruit is not proof that it does not work. The same is true for church planting. We must throw many seeds and plant many times to see lasting fruit, and perfectionism does not help us. We must start with the people we have at the degree of health that they have, and we must give them the identity that Christ has purchased for them, not just as individuals, but also as the community of faith the Scriptures call church.

Questions for Conversation

1. Do you agree with the author that church identity comes before church activity?
2. How do you define church? How do you distinguish biblical essentials from secondary, cultural aspects of church?
3. What do you think of the author’s two questions for helping groups transition into churches? Are there other ideas or tools you have found helpful in this area?

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