

SERIES: This We Believe

SERMON: **I Believe in the Church**

SCRIPTURE: Ephesians 4:1-16

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Today I would like to communicate one primary truth: the Church of Jesus Christ is the hope of the world. God is working in other organizations and He touches individuals in a mighty way, but the principal instrument through which He has promised to impact this world for good is not individuals or organizations, not the United Nations, nor the American government, nor the Red Cross, but the Church. I will go further: the principal instrument God has promised to use even within the Body of Christ is not Bible Study Fellowship or Young Life or Promise Keepers, but the local church.

The local church has an advantage over any other Christian organization in that it most nearly resembles a family. Only in the church do we find both men and women, children, singles, parents, and grandparents, people of every economic status, every educational level, every race. Now this sometimes appears to be a handicap. The church has difficulty mobilizing its resources and efforts as quickly as can Campus Crusade or Focus on the Family. It cannot target certain segments of society as effectively as World Impact or Prison Fellowship. But when it comes to full-orbed worship, biblical balance, spiritual growth, meeting the needs of the grief-stricken and dying, or providing children a place to develop their faith—no one has been able to improve upon the local church.

Sadly, it seems that people either swear by the church or swear at it. It all depends upon one's personal experience. If one has been fortunate, as I have been throughout most of my adult life, to be involved in churches characterized by sincere worship, godly leadership, commitment to Scripture, feeding, fellowship, and freedom, then it is easy to swear *by* the church. On the other hand, if one has found the church to be steeped in human traditions, apostate in its theology, rife with politics and manipulation, or just plain boring, then swearing *at* it may be more natural. But church never has to be that way. Gathering at church should be the high point of our week, and if it isn't, it's probably for one of three reasons:

1. Something may be wrong with our church.
2. Something may be wrong with us.
3. Or both.

This morning I want to share with you an overview of what the church is supposed to be, according to Scripture. Let's start with the proposed Article 7 of our Statement of Faith:

The Church

We believe that the true church comprises all who have been justified by God's grace through faith alone in Christ alone. They are united by the Holy Spirit in the body of Christ, of which He is the Head. The true church is manifest in local churches, whose membership should be composed only of believers. The Lord Jesus mandated two ordinances, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which visibly and tangibly express the

gospel. Though they are not the means of salvation, when celebrated by the church in genuine faith, these ordinances confirm and nourish the believer.

Please turn with me to Ephesians 4:1-16, where we will read one of the key passages in the NT on the nature and function of the Church. I am not going to camp on this text but I do want it to help mold our thinking this morning.

As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called—one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Verse 11: It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

The nature of the Church

We use the term “church” in four different ways—to mean all Christians (the family of God), a local congregation (First Evangelical Free Church), a denomination (the Lutheran Church), or even a building (the church on the corner). But in the New Testament the term is used only in the first two senses—to refer to the universal church or the local church—never a building or a denomination.

The Universal Church is made up of the sum total of everyone who has received Jesus Christ as Savior and is thus a member of the family of God. It is sometimes called the invisible church or the Body of Christ. People from all denominations, ethnic backgrounds, language groups, social and economic strata, and educational background comprise the universal church. We see this use of the term “church” in Acts 8:1-3:

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church (the believers) at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. Godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him. But Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison.

When it says Saul began to destroy the church, he wasn't tearing down the steeple or breaking the stained glass, because there wasn't any. He was killing Christians wherever he could find

them and driving the rest into exile. But even when the Christians were scattered abroad they were still “the church.” The Church is people. The church is us.

The local church is, of course, that portion of the universal church which happens to meet in a particular place. Most of the over 100 references to “church” in the New Testament speak of the local church, like the Church at Ephesus, the Church at Philippi, or the Church at Thessalonica. Now we must understand that not everyone in a local church is part of the universal church, and by the same token, not everyone in the universal church is necessarily in a local church. It is quite easy for an unconverted person (i.e. someone who by definition isn’t part of the universal church) to join some local churches because they have such inadequate standards of membership. By the same token, unfortunately, some truly converted people don’t see the need to belong to a local church. I think they’re making a mistake, but it happens.

The inauguration of the Church

There is considerable debate among theologians as to when the church began.

The origin of the Church. Some theologians go back to the call of Abraham and the covenant God made with him as the beginning of the church. Others go back even earlier to include all those who have exercised faith in the promises of God beginning with Adam. Other Bible scholars understand the church as a distinct New Testament work of God. Some of them believe Jesus Himself began the church during His earthly ministry, while others hold that it did not become a reality until the coming of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. Still others, called ultradispensationalists, delay the origin of the church until the time of Paul, but unfortunately they can’t agree on whether the church began in Acts 9, 13 and 28.

I personally believe the New Testament evidence points to the origin of the church on the day of Pentecost. I would certainly not suggest that believers in the Old Testament were any less the people of God than believers today, but I do believe the church to be a new work of God begun in the New Testament era. By its very nature as the body of Christ it is dependent upon the finished work of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Jesus Himself predicted its establishment during his earthly life, and the apostle Paul spoke of it as a mystery not revealed in previous times as it is now.

One of the unique features of the Church (as opposed to the people of God in Old Testament times) is the fact that in the Church there is neither Jew nor Gentile, bond or free, male or female (Gal. 3:28). That was certainly not true of the people of God in the Old Testament. Being Jewish was so important that a convert was required to be circumcised as a proselyte Jew before he could worship with the people of God.

The foundation of the Church is the person and work of Christ, as we read in Ephesians 4. He is the cornerstone upon which the whole foundation depends. He is the one who laid down the ethical imperatives for the church; defined its mission, its power, and its authority; ordered its discipline; established its ordinances; and most importantly, provided a right standing

with God by His finished work at Calvary. There is a significant sense, however, in which the apostles and prophets were also foundational to the church, as indicated in Eph. 2:19-20: “Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.” They provided much of the permanent teaching or doctrine upon which the church is founded.

The organization of the Church

One might think that the organization of the church is not very important, but if you have ever been part of a church that was autocratic or abusive or chaotic or rigid you would understand how critical the right organization can be.

1. Its government. There are basically three kinds of church government that have been used down through the centuries, and each makes a claim to being the “biblical” form.

The **episcopal** system puts the local church under the authority of a bishop, who represents the denominational hierarchy in appointing pastors and setting policy. Under him there are priests and deacons. The Episcopal form is used, of course, in Episcopalianism, but also in Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Lutheranism, Methodism, and Mormonism. Some, like the Catholic Church and Orthodoxy have an elaborate hierarchy over the bishop, while others, like Methodism, have very little.

In the **presbyterian** form the local church is ruled internally by a Session, or Board of Ruling Elders with the teaching elder (or Pastor) as the presiding officer. The local Session is responsible to the presbytery, which is made up of all the ordained ministers and one ruling elder from each local congregation in a given district. The Presbytery is, in turn responsible to the synod, which reports to the General Assembly, which is the highest court of the church. The main difference between the episcopal form and the Presbyterian form is that the hierarchy is made up of powerful individuals in the episcopal form and of powerful groups in the Presbyterian form, but in both, authority resides outside the local church.

In the **congregational** form the local church is autonomous, with the congregation retaining authority (under Christ) for its own destiny. Ultimate authority is vested in the members themselves, while the congregation owns its own property, hires its own pastors, and sets its own budget. Pastors and other officers have no more ecclesiastical authority than any other member. Most Baptist churches, Bible churches, Free Churches, Covenant churches, congregational and community churches are congregational in form.

Some biblical evidence can be marshaled for each of these forms of government, but I personally believe the congregational form to be the closest to what we see practiced in the New Testament. It best balances the leadership of those ordained for ministry with the priesthood of all believers. However, I would say that if there are godly leaders in charge, any of these three forms will work, and, by the same token, if a church has ungodly leaders, none of these systems

will work.

No matter what basic form of government a church subscribes to, it has officers and ministers.

2. Its officers and ministers. At least two kinds of church leaders are delineated in the New Testament—Elders and Deacons—though some see the Bishop or Overseer as distinct from the Elder. Congregational churches such as ours generally have a plurality of Elders, with the pastor viewed as one of them. These Elders oversee the spiritual life of the congregation, casting vision, setting policy, and exercising discipline, as needed. Deacons, generally subordinate to the Board of Elders, often handle the physical plant, the finances, benevolence, and various kinds of service areas. Here at First Free we have added an office not found in the NT—the Trustee. Our Trustees form a sort of finance committee, taking the facility and finance issues off the Deacons’ plate so they can concentrate on service. I have no problem with such a position because I believe NT church government is more descriptive than prescriptive.

A key factor to remember, however, is that no matter what names or titles are given to pastors or other church officers, the real ministers of a church are those who sit in the pew. The professional pastors are supposed to be equippers, educating and training the members so that they can do the work of ministry. This may be a new concept to some, but it is very biblical. Consider Eph. 4:11 again: “Jesus gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to *prepare God's people* for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up. . .” So, if you hear someone say, “I think the ministers in our church are doing a lousy job,” realize that they are talking about you, or criticizing themselves!

3. Its laws and membership. Every organization has laws and membership. The laws of the local church are found in the New Testament. We are under the Law of Christ. His word is our command. Generally a local church will, in addition, establish a constitution and a set of By-laws to provide for orderly decision making, and the Scriptures seem to allow significant leeway in doing this. But the most important part of any church’s constitution is its statement of faith. It should be clear, concise, thoroughly biblical, and there should be no compromise on the fundamentals it proclaims. One of the values of this current sermon series is to acquaint you with our Statement of Faith, particularly the new one that will be voted on next month by our congregational delegates.

The issue of membership in a local church is not as clear in the New Testament as we might think. Church involvement, however, is very clear, as Hebrews 10:25 exhorts believers not to forsake the assembling of themselves together. That church meetings were held at least weekly on Sundays is beyond dispute. Acts 20:7 says, “On the first day of the week we came together to break bread. Paul spoke to the people and, because he intended to leave the next day, kept on talking until midnight.” See, we even have here a biblical defense of long sermons. Praise God!

Not only is church attendance commanded, but so is fellowship and accountability and giving and serving. Whether or not early Christians kept membership rolls or not, I am not sure;

with small house churches it probably was unnecessary. However, a strong argument can be made for membership rolls in any church where congregationalism is practiced, for only true believers should be voting on issues that govern the church of Jesus Christ.ⁱ

4. Its discipline. It is clear from the NT that the church must not take a *laissez faire* attitude toward the conduct and beliefs of its members. If someone is found to be living contrary to the doctrine or practice of true Christianity he must be warned, then reprimanded, then disciplined, and ultimately (if none of these actions changes his heart) excommunicated.

However, the NT also teaches that we must restore fallen brothers and sisters when by God's grace there is true repentance. Probably the most powerful service I have ever witnessed was some twenty years ago in St. Louis when we had the privilege of welcoming into our membership a couple who had sinned grievously and had been excommunicated by another church. In fact, the man had been a pastor and was defrocked by his denomination. But welcoming them into our church as members in good standing was possible only after God did a marvelous work in their hearts and only after they made public confession to their previous church and denomination and were granted forgiveness.ⁱⁱ The process took over two years, but they are still active members of our church in St. Louis.

The ordinances of the Church

We believe there are two practices which Christ specifically ordained for the Church to continue throughout the Church age—baptism and the Lord's Supper. Allow me to comment briefly on why we call these “ordinances” instead of “sacraments.” The term ordinance, meaning simply “something ordained by Christ”, views baptism and the Lord's Supper as primarily symbols of grace; the term “sacrament” views them as conveyers of grace. Many who use the term “sacrament” interpret the ordinances as means of salvation.

Baptism is the initiatory rite of the Christian church. Beginning on the day of Pentecost in response to Peter's great sermon, baptism was practiced consistently in the early church. F. F. Bruce, superb New Testament scholar, writes that “the idea of an unbaptized Christian is simply not entertained in the New Testament.”ⁱⁱⁱ When the apostles proclaimed the Gospel they called for a decision which inevitably culminated in baptism.

Baptism, however, was clearly subordinate to the Gospel. In 1 Cor. 1:14 Paul says, “I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the Gospel.” Obviously Paul viewed baptism as separate from the Gospel because he could preach the Gospel without baptizing.

1. Its meaning. Baptism signifies our identification with Christ. At baptism the name of the Lord is pronounced over the one being baptized and the individual himself openly confesses his submission to the Lordship of Jesus. One theologian calls baptism the time when one who has been an enemy of Christ makes “his final surrender.”^{iv}

Identification with Christ is also identification with His great saving acts. The waters of baptism thus picture washing or cleansing from the defilement of sin. The baptismal act further signifies the believer's death to the old life and his resurrection as a new creature in union with Christ. Listen to Rom. 6:4: "We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life." And baptism signifies identification with the Church. One cannot be united to the Head without at the same time being united with the Body.

2. Its importance. Baptism is important because it is commanded by Christ. What right do we have to take any of his commands lightly or pick and choose which ones we will obey? Nevertheless any interpretation of baptism which makes the rite essential for salvation must be rejected. It is the outward sign of an inward faith, and it is an important step of faith that brings many to a new level of spiritual growth and understanding.

3. Its mode. In the Evangelical Free Church we primarily practice baptism by immersion, but other churches sprinkle or pour. The amount of water is not nearly as important as the meaning vested in the ordinance. Nevertheless, I believe immersion provides the clearest picture of the spiritual realities behind baptism. After all, no other mode comes close to symbolizing our death, burial, and resurrection with Christ or our identification with Him and His Church as well as immersion. Furthermore, the Greek word for baptize clearly means "to immerse or dip." The Greek language had terms for sprinkling and pouring, and these terms are used in the New Testament, but never for baptism.

4. Infant baptism. I would like to see the hands of all those here this morning who were baptized as infants. It looks like at least 40% of the congregation. What this demonstrates is that Christians of widely differing doctrinal positions believe it is appropriate to publicly recognize that our children are a gift from God, and to place them under the Lord's care. We do that through child dedication; other churches use baptism. I personally don't view infant baptism as a heresy (unless it is taught that baptism saves the child), but I do think it easily confuses in a lot of people's minds the issue of when a person becomes a part of God's spiritual family. Original sin is not washed away by baptism; it is washed away when we put our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. (And I don't think there's any meaningful sense in which a month-old child can be said to believe in Christ).

Furthermore, there is no clear example of infant baptism in the New Testament, and I would think that if God intended for us to baptize our children, especially if it had anything to do with their salvation, He would have made it obvious by providing at least one clear example.

5. Re-baptism. I encourage re-baptism if a person was baptized as an infant, because that was an expression of the parents' faith, not the child's. But I strongly reject the practice of many Southern Baptist churches of requiring re-baptism of those who were baptized as believers but not in a Southern Baptist Church. That takes the ordinance away from the Body of Christ and turns it into a denominational issue.^v

The second biblically ordained rite for the life of the church is the Lord's Supper, also called

communion or the Eucharist or the breaking of the bread.

The Lord's Supper. The Lord's Supper was instituted by Christ on the night before His death. As the Passover meal called to mind God's redemption of His people from the slavery of Egypt, The Lord's Supper was designed to cause us to remember our redemption from the slavery of sin. There are four basic views of the meaning of the Lord's Supper.

1. Transubstantiation is the Roman Catholic view that the bread and the wine mysteriously and miraculously turn into the body and blood of Christ as the priest consecrates it. This is based upon a very literal interpretation of the words, "this is my Body," and "this is my blood." Since the wine is viewed as the very blood of Christ, the priest must drink all of it and even wipe the residue of the cup so that none of the blood is lost.

2. Consubstantiation is the Lutheran view of communion. It also holds to the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in communion, but without any transformation of the elements as in transubstantiation. Rather, the body and blood are said to be "in, with, and under" the bread and wine.

3. The spiritual presence view is the position of the Reformed churches. It rejects the physical bodily presence of Christ but does believe that Christ is spiritually present through the Holy Spirit in a unique way. The Person of Christ can be enjoyed in Communion in a more intimate way than at other times.

4. The memorial view is the view of many evangelicals and most fundamentalists. It holds that the Lord's Supper is an act commemorating the Lord's death and takes the words, "this is my body" to mean, "this represents my body," which is a legitimate interpretation of the Greek. It also stresses the three-fold command, "Do this in remembrance of me."

I personally believe that both the spiritual presence view and the memorial view have strong support in Scripture, but I lean toward the spiritual presence view. Christ *is* spiritually present in communion in a special way, and the eating and drinking does more than just remind us of an historical fact—it nourishes our spirits and feeds our souls. It signifies faith in Him and reliance on His death.

How do we "do" Church here at First Free?

Obviously there are a thousand ways of "doing church." Are we doing it right? I would like to explore this area by asking five questions, but unfortunately I won't have much time to answer them this morning.

Are we Word-centered? In my estimation the most important factor distinguishing churches from one another is the place the Bible plays in church life. I remember a Disciples of Christ church I attended for a year while I was preparing for the ministry. I attended this church because I had the opportunity to teach the adult S.S. class, but the pastor was a sorry excuse for a

spiritual leader. Every Sunday morning he would read a few verses from the big pulpit Bible, then ceremoniously put it on a shelf under the pulpit and that was the last we saw or heard from God. Sadly, that's the norm in most American churches.

Are we Spirit-empowered? Ideally every local church should be a Word and Spirit church. That is, we should be great students of the Scriptures, but at the same time we should be so led and empowered by the Holy Spirit that the world could not explain what goes on between these four walls. Some churches are unexplainable alright, but it's not because of the Spirit's power.

Are we culturally relevant? Wow! Does this question ever open a can of worms! Two new movements have seized the imagination of thousands of churches in the past few decades. One is the seeker movement and the other is called the emerging church or the emergent church. We have examples of both here in Wichita. These are churches that have become convinced that the church as a whole is no longer culturally relevant. It's not that the world is opposing us so much as that they are ignoring us. And so they will go to great lengths to draw the unsaved into the church to challenge them with the Gospel. I admire the motive, and in some cases the results have been positive. Many of you received a mailer from one east-side church announcing a sermon series on the music of Billy Joel. I know that pastor and I really like him; he's solidly evangelical. But some churches, unfortunately, have substituted entertainment for worship, talks for sermons, dramas for illustrations, and do it all in an hour or less. No wonder it is often called "church lite."

Our Elders have determined that we want to be seeker friendly without becoming seeker oriented. That is not to say these other churches are wrong—it's just not what we feel called to be. However, are we even seeker friendly? Does the average person who attends here for the first time feel loved and respected? Does he feel that we care about his eternal soul?

Are we a worshiping church? Frankly churches which focus a lot of time and attention on expository preaching, as ours does, run the risk of having its people begin to think of church as a place to gather information. It must be more than that. Our highest priority is to worship, and the sermon is just one way in which we worship. It is our hope and prayer that Andy McLellan, our new worship pastor, will be able to teach us more about how to employ music in sincere worship.

Are we a disciple-making church? What is our product? No business could be successful without knowing what it is trying to produce. What are we producing? I think the answer should be "disciples or fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ," but are we succeeding?

Conclusion: There are a number of other issues I would raise this morning if we had time. We certainly have not exhausted the subject of the church, but in conclusion, allow me to ask you two very personal questions about your own relationship to the church. First, are you a member of the universal church, the Body of Christ? You know, you can't say "yes" to that question just because you belong to a local church or to a certain denomination, or even because you are

religious. You become a member of the Body of Christ by placing your faith in Jesus and receiving forgiveness for your sins.

But second, what is your relationship to the local church? Assuming for most of you that this is the local church you call home, how would you rank your involvement and relationship? One way to answer that question is by answering some other questions:

Would First Free be better or worse off if everyone was as regular as I am?

Would it be better or worse off if everyone volunteered as much time as I?

Would it be better or worse off if everyone gave the same percentage of his income?

Would it be better or worse off if everyone was growing spiritually at the same rate I am?

The church is you, friend, not some external entity that you can stand back and criticize. It's your spiritual family. It's God's ordained means for you to grow and mature. God loves the Church. It is the apple of His eye. May you grow to love it, too.

i. What should be the requirements of membership in a local church? First and foremost, the individual should have a credible testimony of faith in Christ. In addition, he should be willing to affirm that his doctrinal views are compatible with the church's statement of faith, for how can two walk together unless they be agreed? Here at First Free we do not practice transfer of membership, as do some churches. Even those who come to us from other Evangelical Free Churches are asked to share a testimony of their faith in Christ to a committee of deacons. For true believers it should be a privilege to share their faith.

ii. Our church recognizes the discipline of other believing churches. A person who comes to this church while under discipline by another church must make a good faith effort to heal those broken relationships through confession and repentance before he can become a member or serve in this family of believers. It should not be possible to violate the covenant involved in joining a fellowship, then just pick up stakes and move to a new fellowship with a business-as-usual attitude.

iii. F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, 77.

iv. G. R. Beasley-Murray, *Baptism Today and Tomorrow*, 43

v. One other factor I would like for us to consider is the timing of baptism. Every baptism in Acts took place almost immediately following the confession of faith, and thus those churches which practice immediate baptism are on solid biblical grounds. I think, however, that there is a good rationale today for waiting several months after conversion before baptizing an individual. In the first century, as in Muslim cultures today, baptism was viewed as the point of no return.

Missionaries in Muslim countries tell us that it's not difficult to get Muslims to profess faith in Christ, but when you talk to them about baptism, most of them disappear. That's because they know that if they are baptized they will lose their families, their homes, their jobs, and perhaps even their lives. Anyone who agrees to be baptized in the face of that kind of persecution clearly demonstrates that his faith is real.

We, however, live in a culture which couldn't care less if we were baptized every week. Baptism has lost its cultural significance for us. Therefore, an argument can be made that we need some other means of judging whether a person is serious about following Christ--namely is he growing in godliness in the early stages of his Christian life. If he is, then we should challenge him to be baptized. Now my own thinking is that a person should be baptized as soon as he understands the implications of discipleship and obedience, but even those who have waited years to be baptized should not continue to ignore Christ's command; it's never too late to be obedient.