

Chapter One:

The 1st Essential **E**MBRACED IDENTITY

“Meeting As a Church in Jesus’ Name”

One of the first things every gathering of Christians needs to do is get clear about what they *are*. Are they a Bible study, a fellowship/support/prayer group, a social gathering, an outreach ministry or an actual church? The reason why discerning this is so important is because, if indeed they are a church, certain privileges and responsibilities are attached to that identity which must be embraced if they’re going to fulfill their calling.

We have to reach some agreement on how best to answer the question, “What is a church? What is the simplest, God-sanctioned definition we can come up with?” I’ve been surprised at the number of long-time believers I’ve consulted, including myself, who have been initially unsure how to respond to this question.

Jesus once described a scenario where brothers who belong to the same church are at odds. He instructs the one who feels offended to follow a three-step procedure designed to bring about reconciliation. But if the offender remains stubbornly defensive, the church as a whole is ultimately to escort that man to the door and hang an “unwelcome” sign there with his name on it.

Mt. 18:15 “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. 16 But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’ 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.”

Jesus followed those instructions with an explanation of *why* it’s appropriate for His assembled people, flawed and earthbound as they are, to make such a stern and final decision. It’s because their actions are sanctioned and backed by heaven, itself. As long as they have diligently sought God’s mind together and reached an agreement, they can proceed with confidence that He approves.

Mt. 18:18 “I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19 Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven.”

When it comes to finalizing enormously significant decisions (like excommunication), how many of God's people need to be involved in the deliberation and agreement-reaching process? Only two. That's amazing! How can that possibly be enough? Jesus explains in the next verse:

Mt. 18:20 "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

It's not that Jesus isn't "present" with each of us individually when we're by ourselves. But He is uniquely available to guide and assist us when we meet with others to transact spiritual business that matters to Him.

Now notice: In verse 17, Jesus refers to the decision-making body He has in mind as "the church." In verses 19-20, He refers to it as two (or three) believers who have "come together." The passage doesn't say so explicitly, but it seems fair to assume that these believers are not meeting with each other for the first time. They have an ongoing relationship and belong to a recognized community of faith. If that's correct, a bare-bones definition of church might go like this:

"Followers of Jesus who regularly come together."

But something is still missing, isn't it? Jesus added a final qualifier in verse 20 that must be included for Him to approve of our definition and our decisions. Just because two or three Christians regularly meet together doesn't make them a church. Those who believe every Christian couple or family is automatically a church are stretching it. Plenty of believers meet often with friends of like faith to eat, hike, bowl, quilt, go to school, etc. Their gatherings are not all churches in the sense Matthew 18 has in mind, because their purpose for meeting is different. According to verse 20, a real church consists of two or more...

*"Followers of Jesus who regularly come together **and intentionally meet in His name.**"*

Every once in awhile I slightly wince when people attach the phrase, "In Jesus' name, amen," to the end of their prayers. It's not a **bad** thing to say, but it seems to mean little more than, "I'm done praying now and I really meant it." Surely praying and meeting in Jesus' name means more.

Suppose a mother sends her young son to school with \$5 and asks him to pick up a gallon of milk on his way home. He remembers, but he cannot resist adding some of his favorite cookies and gummy worms to the purchase. The problem is that those goodies push the total past \$5, so he settles for a quart of milk.

In whose name did the boy act in that store? Not his mother's, but his own. Doing a thing in someone else's name means you are doing it **for them, on their behalf, as their representative**, keeping **their** interests and desires in mind so that you're careful to accomplish **their** will and bring **them** pleasure.

So is it possible for a group of Christians to meet together, but *not* in Jesus' name? Of course! Some groups don't *intend* to because they know they're not churches. But some churches that *think* they're meeting in His name could get a lot better at it if they would become more *intentional* about it. The reason *why* they're meeting and what they *do* when they're together are all-important factors in determining whether or not they're functioning as Jesus intends.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

What can we do to move from merely "meeting together" to meeting "in His name"? *Lots!*

1. Conscientiously acknowledge and relate to Him as though He is actually present from the very beginning through offerings of prayer and praise.

*Heb. 13:15 "Through Jesus let us **continually** offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, acknowledging his name."*

2. Invite Him to lead us and reveal Himself to us.
3. Regularly consult with and defer to Him as the One in charge of our proceedings, seeking to discern His will and guidance.
4. Keep our attention centered on Him and what He has declared to be important, not merely on what feels important to *us*. Remind each other to get back to this if we sense we're "drifting."
5. Frequently recall the wonder of what He's done for us by taking Communion together. Nothing in the Bible suggests that an ecclesiastical official or ordained minister has to be present in order to do so. Some early believers simply observed the Lord's Supper as part of their informal "church potlucks" (called "love feasts" in those days).
6. Occupy ourselves with doing and completing what He wants, as though we are His servants. *His* business and will, not our own, must become our primary agenda.
7. Seek to handle every situation, activity and interaction as he Himself would, as His representatives and ambassadors.
8. Listen to others in the group as though He may be speaking through them.
9. Think about, then say or do whatever we believe He wants us to, both as individuals and as a group.

10. Respond to and care for each other as He himself would: generously, kindly, patiently, compassionately, sometimes sternly, etc.
11. Make sure we're committed to all ten ESSENTIALS, as they are all expressions of His design for us.

Any time a church fails to shine in these ways, its people are out of sync with their Lord and quickly need to correct their course. In the words of this first priority, they need to be more assertive at embracing their identity. Asking some diagnostic, solution-oriented questions in an open, Christ-centered setting can quickly guide us toward clarity about what's not working and what to do about it. Try these:

ASSESSMENT / APPLICATION QUESTIONS

1. How well does our church do at meeting "in Jesus' name" every time (and for the *whole* time) we're together? Is it obvious that He is present and actively in charge? Explain.
2. What sometimes distracts or hinders us from meeting in Jesus' name as He desires? What gets us off-track?
3. What kinds of practical things can we do to ensure that we stay focused on Jesus and what's important to Him while we're together? (*See the list of Practical Suggestions, above, for answers that can lead to noticeable changes in behavior and format.*)

RECAP

A church exists whenever followers of Jesus regularly come together and intentionally meet in His name. If yours is a genuine church, your always-first obligation together—no, your *privilege*—is to *embrace* that identity by making sure that Jesus occupies the lone Director's chair, and that everyone else stays focused on loving Him and doing what He wants.

The Bottom Line:
"Jesus Is Our Focus."