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“Church” is a verb  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
August 3, 2025  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 16:13-20, 1 Corinthians 11:17-22, James 1:26-27, 2:14-17, 5:13-20  
[church in sign language, church, kyrkan, kirche, iglesia, kilise, chiesa, kanisa, igreja, jiaohui]

If any of you are tempted to go into professional ministry - I have a warning for you. You will have to go through numerous interviews with church committees. And you will be forced to reflect - over and over - on what, exactly, the word “church” means. It’s an important exercise of course. But it is harder than you might think. Because you can spend your entire life as part of a church without ever really asking what the word “church” means.

The meaning depends on context of course. If you are yelling at a family member and you say, “hurry up, or we will be late for church” then the word “church” means a Sunday morning worship service. If you say, “I wish that this church had a pancake supper” then the word “church” refers to the congregation. If you say, our church needs an elevator then the word “church” means the building. If you say that the church needs to apologize for something historic - for example making an apology to indigenous people - then “church” refers to the leadership of a denomination.

Do you want to know what I think the word “church” means? We will get there. But I should be honest and tell you why I think that the definition of the word “church” is worth discussing. It’s because I believe that we are in a time when many are questioning the role and perhaps even the value of church in our modern world. And that is a great reason to ask - from time to time - what does “church” actually mean? And of course I want to leave you all with something to think about while I’m away on holidays.

There are many formal answers to the question of what “church” means. From the Bible, from convention, from the Pope. But I do not believe that the answer comes from any of those sources. I think the meaning of the word “church” comes from how we live, love, and act together. But I’m getting ahead of myself here.

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[image: sugarcane]

I was reminded of this this week actually. Because on Thursday we watched and discussed the movie “Sugarcane”. So I naturally thought about how Canadian churches have reacted to the history of residential schools. And how they have failed to react.

[image: pope in canada]

In particular, that reminded me of the previous Pope’s visit to Canada in 2022 to made formal apologies for the Catholic Church’s role in Canadian residential schools.

And that reminded me that in June 2007 the Roman Catholic Church released a document that discussed the meaning of the word “church”. What was notable was that according to the Roman Catholic Church, we in the United Church of Canada are not a church.

According to that document, Protestant groups like us are “ecclesial communities”, not “churches”. An ecclesial community is a community that gathers for worship and mission. According to this document, we are not considered a church because we do not follow what is called “apostolic succession”.

[image: apostolic succession]

“Apostolic succession is the belief, held in many churches such as Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican traditions, that church authority is passed down through an unbroken line of bishops beginning with the apostles of Jesus. The idea is that through the laying on of hands in ordination, today’s bishops carry on the mission and teaching authority first given by Christ to the apostles. For Protestants - especially churches like the United Church of Canada that do not have bishops - authority is often seen as rooted more in the gathered community of believers and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, rather than in a direct institutional lineage.”<sup>1</sup>

When I was ordained, an authority figure laid hands on me. But it was the President of Toronto Conference. The highest authority at Conference at the time. Not someone with apostolic authority.

[image: got apostolic succession?]

We may not meet the Roman Catholic Church’s formal definition of a church, but

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<sup>1</sup> According to ChatGPT.

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that does not bother me. Our call is not to replicate an institution, but to be a spirit led community of action.

And to be honest, I like the description of us as “ecclesial communities”. I think is accurate. And it is a compliment. United Church documentation affirms this, actually. In documents that come from the Region or from National, Congregations are referred to as “communities of faith”. We are a movement that is led by the Spirit into action. We have no need for apostolic succession. We do not need to be what the Catholic church would call a church.

At the end of the day, the Pope’s statement in 2007 reminds us that different traditions define church in different ways. That does not need to offend us - it just reflects the unique role that each community plays in the wider Christian family. I respect the Catholic Church deeply. And I am delighted that we share space here with a Roman Catholic congregation. They rent space from us. But I do my best to treat them as partners in ministry.

Moving on ... what does the Bible say about “church”.

[image: bible]

Let's begin with the parts of the bible that Jesus wrote. Wait a minute - there is nothing in the Bible that Jesus wrote. Well, how about the gospels? Between the 4 gospels we would expect they say a lot about the church. But no - I can only find 2 references to the church in the gospels.

Here is the first gospel reference. It is a portion of what we read from Matthew earlier.

[image: relevant joke #42 you are peter]

[Jesus speaking] “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of death will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” (Matt 16:18-19)

This is an interesting text in that Jesus tells Peter to build Jesus' church - but does not give any real details as to what that would be like. The larger story, the one we read earlier is common to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But the piece that I just read that

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endorses Peter's special status is found only in Matthew. This is a key gospel text that the Roman Catholic Church uses for their argument for apostolic succession. But I feel compelled to tell you that scholars do not think that the text can be attributed to Jesus. It was written by the early church. As was the great commission found in Matthew 28.

So what did Jesus actually say about church? Nothing. Jesus never told us to start churches, or how to run them if we did start them. Jesus did not tell us to have potluck suppers, or food banks. Jesus did not even weigh in on the theological issue of whether it is more appropriate to have a pizza dinner or a pasta dinner. If only Jesus had given us some good churchy advice. Perhaps churches would work a bit better. Perhaps there would be less fighting in church.

[image: food fight church]

We could have avoided this church fight about how best to organize a potluck supper.

[image: church fight about peace]

And we could have avoided this congregational fight about whether or not we should pass the peace during worship.

It would have been so much easier if Jesus had given some basic advice to churches.

But we should not expect that. Just a reminder - Jesus was not Christian! Jesus was born and died as a Jewish person. Jesus spent his time helping people, teaching, and helping people find healing. Jesus's ministry was mainly around reforming the Judaism of his day. Jesus thought that the Judaism of his day was far too big on rules and far too thin on love and justice. The Judaism of Jesus's day was far too big on talk, and far too thin on action. Jesus tried to renew his own tradition. But his vision proved to be so radical that it instead gave rise to a movement that grew into something new. Jesus never wanted to start a new religion. And Jesus was never a Christian.

For me, the real question is this. If Jesus were here today, would Jesus have the same problem with our churches? Are we ourselves far too big on rules and far too thin on love and justice. Are we ourselves far too big on talk, and far too thin on action? Now there's a great question for your next tea party.

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OK - So what does the rest of the Bible said about church?

[image: irrelevant joke # singing the wrong hymn]

There are over 100 references to the word “church” in the book of acts, the letters of Paul, and the other epistles. Paul's letters, and the other epistles tell us a lot about early church. Because they were letters written by church leaders to specific congregations. Now we are getting somewhere!

The reading from 1 Corinthians this morning shows Paul being annoyed at the congregation in Corinth. He is concerned about the cliques within the church, and the effect that is having on the unity of the church. To the point that the Lord's supper is compromised. This story tells us 2 things:

1. The church in Corinth had problems fairly typical of churches today. Power struggles and divisions.
2. Paul, one of their spiritual leaders, thought it was worth helping to correct this behaviour. The behaviour was brought out in the open, faced, and dealt with. This is community in action. This is community helping each other to grow. This is community solving problems by not being “polite” all the time. I could imagine being a member at that church.

This idea of church reminds me of the introduction to the book of James in the version of the Bible called “The Message”:

“When Christian believers gather in churches, everything that can go wrong sooner or later does. Outsiders, on observing this, conclude that there is nothing to the religion business except, perhaps, business - and dishonest business at that. Insiders see it differently. Just as a hospital collects the sick under one roof and labels them as such, the church collects sinners. Many of the people outside the hospital are every bit as sick as the ones inside, but their illnesses are either undiagnosed or disguised. It's similar with sinners outside the church.

So, Christian churches are not, as a rule, model communities of good behaviour. They are, rather, places where human misbehaviour is brought out in the open, faced, and

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dealt with.” (Introduction to James, MSG)

[image: irrelevant joke # 98: tigger joke]

And the entire book of James supports this idea. James is big on helping people, and that requires action.

1. From chapter 1, “Real religion ... is this: reach out to the homeless and loveless in their plight, and guard against corruption”.
2. From chapter 2, “Isn't it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?”
3. From chapter 5, “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you can live together whole and healed.”

From the New Testament we get the idea that the church was a “movement”. “Church” was not a box for the movement to fit into. “Church” was the movement itself. Early Christians did not go to church. They did church. Which is why I like to say that “church” is a verb. Church is when people follow the spirit of God that directs them to act, to do, to love, and to care. Church is a movement. Church is movement. Church is a verb.

And I have to say. None of this seems to require apostolic succession.

[image: chapel in the park united church]

Frankly, I don't really care what the Pope or the Bible think the word “church” means. Do you want to know what I care about? I care deeply about what each of us thinks the word “church” means. Because we are the ones who make this church what it is. What is our collective vision for “church” right here. Or wherever you find yourself.

I often hear people say that we want new people to come to our churches. Well, that's great. But I want you all to close your eyes for a minute. And imagine - wherever you are - that you are actually surrounded by “new people”. In your mind, look around at these “new people”. Take your time. Now. What are those “new people” like? Do they look and think and act, and dress like you? Do they find delight in the same music that you enjoy? Or are they a diverse collection of people of different ages, different backgrounds, different needs, and different gifts? Spoiler Alert: When new people do

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come to our churches, they do not all look, or think, or act like we do. And we can either embrace them for who they are .... or .... we can stop saying that we want new people here.

What is our vision for church here and now? Are we ourselves far too big on rules and far too thin on love and justice. Are we ourselves far too big on talk, and far too thin on action? What is our vision for this church right here? Wherever you are. You have all summer to think about that.

[image: stewardship prayer]

I want to close with the Stewardship Prayer (Archdiocese of Rochester):

My church is composed of people like me. I help make it what it is. It will be friendly, if I am. Its pews will be filled, if I help fill them. It will do great work, if I work. It will make generous gifts to many causes, if I am a generous giver. It will bring other people into its worship and fellowship, if I invite and bring them. It will be a church of loyalty and love, of fearlessness and faith, and a church with a noble spirit, if I, who make it what it is, am filled with these same things. Therefore, with the help of God, I shall dedicate myself to the task of being all the things that I want my church to be.

*Amen.*