



WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

A Small Group Journey

PARTICIPANT GUIDE

Introduction

To the family of God at New Albany Presbyterian Church,

Welcome to *What is the Church? – A Small Group Journey!* As the title suggests, your small group will be together for the next several weeks learning about this organization and movement Jesus said would be powerful enough to withstand even the gates of hell. (See Matthew 16:18) Does church feel that important to you? What is its purpose anyway? How we answer these questions and others like them will dictate how we engage in the church, both down the street and across the globe.

Each week of this study will follow the same format. We'll kick things off with some background in the "Let's Get Started" section, then "Focus Your Mind" with a general question to get on task. Next you'll dig into the questions of the "Roundtable" and finally "Takeaway" the main point of the week. Between group meetings, "It's Go Time" so you can put into action what you've just learned. Please read through the Bible passages and answer the questions each week before the next group meeting. This will enrich your discussion time.

Putting this Bible study together has been a blessing and a privilege. Special thanks go to my gifted team: Janet Dehmer, Shannon Holbert, Darrell and Carol Holmes, Andy and Tiffany Larned, Anne Liptak, David Milroy, David Mitchell and Karla Muzi. Their writing, editing (re-editing) and designing made this study possible. My prayer is that this small group journey deepens your love for and commitment to Christ's church.

Glory to God alone,
Ken Rathburn



Participant Guide

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WHY GO TO CHURCH?

Week 1

WHY GO TO CHURCH?

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

/// BIG IDEAS

The “church” is two things: (1) a gathered group of Christians meeting for worship, and (2) God’s means of advancing his Gospel for the saving and sanctification of his people. It is for those reasons that we go to church.

LET’S GET STARTED

What image comes to mind when you hear the word *church*? Perhaps it resembles something with a steeple—a place you go on Sunday morning complete with pews, a pastor and a pulpit. It probably includes a group of people clothed in their niceties (metaphorically and literally). Maybe it’s a place where you invest an hour of your week until the following Sunday (or the next holiday, whether Christmas or Easter).

Alternatively, the word *church* may conjure up the vision of a big warehouse-style building with all sorts of amenities and a “show” inside that rivals the concert you went to the night before. And yet, to some, their idyllic picture of church is on a screen, while on their couch and in their jammies.

Does *church* mean all of those things, some of them or none of them? When we take a closer look at how our culture defines church compared to how it is Biblically defined, we might just be surprised to learn how different the two are. It is easy to be deceived as to what the *church* is, its true mission, and why it’s so vital for us to be a part of it.

FOCUS YOUR MIND

- Why do you go to church?

ROUNDTABLE

What is *church*, really? The Biblical term for “church” actually has nothing to do with a physical structure of any kind. In the New Testament, the word translated “church” is the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means a “called-out gathering” or “assembly.” Inside or outside, in a house or a public place—none of this defines a church. The Old Testament provides a foreshadowing of the church in Exodus 19. God’s people gathered at Mt. Sinai and the glory of God came down upon them. It is in the New Testament, however, where a church is formally established. There we learn that Jesus is the founder and the foundation of the true church.

/// READ MATTHEW 16:13-19 OUT LOUD.

• **What was different about Peter’s description of who Jesus is compared to others? How does that relate to the foundation of the church?**

• **You may have heard of the term “Body of Christ,” which comes from Ephesians 1:22-23. Is your experience with church more like a family, a body, or something else?**

So, the word *church* in the New Testament is a gathering or assembly of believers called out of the world by God to live by faith under the authority and on the foundation of Jesus Christ. This can refer to all true believers across all places and times (universal/invisible church) or a specific congregation within a particular region (local church).

/// READ ACTS 2:42-47 OUT LOUD, which provides a beautiful picture of the first local church in Jerusalem around 30 A.D.

• **Discuss the fundamental differences between the reasons families gather versus audiences. Which should characterize the church and is that consistent with your experience?**

/// READ MATTHEW 28:19-20 AND 22:37-40 OUT LOUD.

• **Based on those verses, what is the mission of the church?**

• **The word “disciple” comes from the Latin word *discipulus*, which means “student, learner or follower.” How does the call to make disciples impact your view of the mission of the church?**

Still, even if this describes what the church is, why would any individual decide to go to church at all? For some, “going to church” is just another rule among the other dos and don'ts of Christianity. For others, it seems unnecessary and antiquated—replaced by podcasts or a good Bible app.

/// READ HEBREWS 10:24-25 OUT LOUD.

• **We are commanded to meet regularly. List some of the consequences of not meeting together, for us and for the church itself.**

/// READ 1 TIMOTHY 6:15-16 AND EPHESIANS 2:8-10 OUT LOUD.

• **Describe God by using words from these verses or that come to mind after reading them. Is this how you see and think about him? How would seeing him this way impact your view of and experience in worship?**

Bottom line: God commands us to worship him for who he is, but it doesn't stop there. Proper understanding of God leads to proper worship of God, by command but also by a growing desire. He and he alone is worthy of our praise, and we should do so exactly as he desires. And that takes us to another concept: *liturgy*.

Week 1

WHY GO TO CHURCH

The word *liturgy* means “work of the people.” It is the order of worship that includes the more participatory portions of the worship service. Unlike consumers, these portions of the worship service allow everyone present to actively worship God together.

• **Whether you go to Traditional or Acoustic worship, NAPC follows the same liturgical practices. Can you name any or all of the sections of the liturgy?**

• **Briefly describe each of the liturgical elements.**

• There is one more special aspect of the worship service not listed, which we will talk about in depth in a future week. Do you know which one it is?

• Look back at the liturgical elements (with the Sermon as well). Why do you think the liturgy is set up and ordered this way? How does the liturgy make worship different than watching a sermon video or listening to a podcast?

No video or podcast can possibly prepare one's heart in the same way that proper corporate worship does! This doesn't mean listening to teachings outside of worship is bad—it's a great thing to do—but it is no substitute for the totality of a liturgical worship service that takes place alongside fellow believers as part of the family of God.

• Although not the same, how could the model and process of liturgical worship be a roadmap for how we approach each day of our lives?

TAKEAWAY

In the end, the church is not a building or structure of any sort. It is God's people gathered together to worship him, be transformed by him, and to be equipped to do the work he intends us to do.

“ The happy life is this - to rejoice to thee, in thee, and for thee.”

- Augustine, *Confessions*

IT'S GO TIME

- **SHARE** — Tell someone this week how God's church has made a difference in your life. Invite them to experience that with you on Sunday at NAPC.
- **READ** — Meditate on the following passages about how the church enriches us: Encouragement (Hebrews 10:25), Serving joyfully (Romans 12:9-13), Humility (Romans 12:14-21), Leadership/accountability Ephesians; 4:11-13; Proverbs 27:17; James 5:16), Church health (John 15:2).
- **PRAY** — Thank God for his church, and ask him to reveal your particular part in it.
- **CHANGE** — What one thing can you do or approach differently after this week's study? Go and do it.

Week 1

WHY GO TO CHURCH



WHY BECOME A CHURCH MEMBER?

Week 2

WHY BECOME A CHURCH MEMBER?

/// BIG IDEAS

Every converted Christian is called to become a member of a local church. There should be no “Lone Rangers” or passive consumers in the flock.

LET'S GET STARTED

When someone places their faith in Jesus we call this person a *convert*. Michael Lawrence provides a helpful definition in his book *Conversion*: “A *convert* is someone whose heart has been transformed by God’s grace, who is characterized by repentance and faith, who desires to be with God and know him more.” This person is now a Christian, but is not (yet) part of a local church.

Last week, we began to look at what *church* really is, and explored the reasons we attend. We learned the church is God’s people gathered together, growing in love and holiness, under the authority of Jesus Christ. This week, we take it a step further and examine the concept of committing to membership in a local church.

FOCUS YOUR MIND

• Describe a club or organization you joined. Why did you join and was it a mistake or a joy?

ROUNDTABLE

For many, the concept of church membership raises many questions. Is the idea even Biblical? Isn’t being a *convert* enough without *membership* and the insider/outsider divides it seems to draw? Much of the New Testament actually teaches about and offers several metaphors (pictures) of active church membership, even without using the word itself. Let’s consider some of these passages together.

/// READ ROMANS 12:3-8 OUT LOUD.

• Put verse 3 into your own words. What is Paul saying about our value in and to the church?

• This passage likens the church to a body with many members. How does the human body struggle if even one of its parts is not functioning as designed? Connect this to the local church.

• Look at the gifts listed in the passage. How are they similar or different from one another? Which of these gifts have you seen put to use at NAPC and in what ways?

/// READ 1 PETER 2:4-6 OUT LOUD.

• Describe the metaphor Peter uses.

/// READ JOHN 15:1-8 OUT LOUD.

Jesus uses this vine-and-branches metaphor to explain how the people of God can bear much fruit, individually but also corporately.

• What kind of fruit does a church produce if it remains in Jesus?

• How does this metaphor further inform us about the interworking of God's church?

Peter refers his listeners back to the Old Testament sacrificial system, carried out through priests where special individuals held that title, allowing them to stand as mediators between God and humans.

• What changed from the Old Testament view if we are now to think of the entire church as a "holy priesthood?"

• Put this metaphor together with the last one. In light of both, what does it mean to "abide" in Jesus?

- Discuss how this relates to the idea of church membership.

Week 2

WHY BECOME A CHURCH MEMBER

- Does a person need to be an official member of a church to be involved in a local church? Why or why not?

By considering these three metaphors, we now have some insight into the what and why of church membership. Now, let's move from the theoretical to practical experience.

In his book, *Church Membership*, Jonathan Leeman defines it this way: “*Church membership* is a formal relationship between a church and a Christian characterized by the church’s affirmation and oversight of a Christian’s discipleship and the Christian’s submission to living out his or her discipleship in the care of the church.”

- How does your involvement in the local church fulfill the definition above? How does it not?

- Are the three metaphors more akin to formal membership in a local church or just involvement?

- How might the commitment of a “formal relationship” with a local church increase the possibility of fulfilling the remainder of the membership definition?

TAKEAWAY

We see the concept of church membership throughout the Bible, even absent the specific word. Similar to the church being a family (as we discussed last week), becoming a member of a local church is no small commitment—like how a finger is part of a body or a stone is part of a building. The formal relationship of membership ensures that the commitment is real and strong, resulting in deeper discipleship and engagement.

“ We must grasp once again, the idea of church membership as being the membership of the body of Christ and as the biggest honor which can come [someone’s] way in this world.”

- Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones

IT'S GO TIME

- **SHARE** — Talk to someone who is a regular attender but not a member at NAPC. Explain what you learned about the importance of formal membership in a local church.
- **READ** — Go through the three metaphor passages again. Where does the Christian church today miss the mark?
- **PRAY** — Thank God for his church, and ask him to show you how to lovingly engage as a crucial member of Christ’s body.
- **CHANGE** — If you’re not a member, consider this your challenge to commit to NAPC membership. If you already are a member, what one thing can you change to better fulfill the definition of membership?



A photograph of a church service. In the foreground, the backs of several people's heads and shoulders are visible as they sit in pews. Many of these people have their hands raised in the air. In the background, a group of people stands on a raised platform, possibly a choir or a group of leaders, some with their hands clasped. The setting appears to be a church sanctuary with light-colored walls and wood paneling.

Week 2

**WHY BECOME A
CHURCH MEMBER**

WHAT MAKES IT A CHURCH?

Part I: Biblical Preaching

Week 3



New Albany
Presbyterian Church

/// BIG IDEAS

There are three characteristics (we will call them “birthmarks”) that make a group of people a church. The first and most important is Christ-centered, Biblical preaching.

LET’S GET STARTED

For the next three sessions, we will examine what we are calling “birthmarks” of the church. These are the three characteristics that make a church, well, a true Christian church.

This week, we begin by examining the most important “birthmark” of the church: *Christ-centered, Biblical preaching*. Here is a definition that should help: *Christ-centered, Biblical preaching* is preaching that focuses on a passage of the Bible, what that passage means and how it points to the cross of Jesus Christ. This form of preaching is critical for two reasons: first, it consistently focuses us on the Gospel; second, it deepens our understanding of and respect for the Word of God.

FOCUS YOUR MIND

• **If you have been part of NAPC (or another church that emphasizes Christ-centered, Biblical preaching), and part of a church that did NOT emphasize it, did you notice the difference? What were the main differences?**

ROUNDTABLE

Let’s begin by considering a passage from Paul’s letter to the Corinthian church. Corinth was a troubled church that Paul planted in a cosmopolitan city filled with all kinds of temptations. The advice he has for them is very instructive for our modern day churches as well.

/// READ 1 CORINTHIANS 15:1-6 OUT LOUD.

• **Why do you think Paul chose to remind the Corinthians of the Gospel?**

The need to be reminded (regularly) of the Gospel was not unique to the Corinthians! Each letter of Paul begins with him re-explaining the Gospel to Christians who have already believed, and then goes on to the implications of belief—how we are to behave in light of the Gospel. We continue to preach the Gospel weekly at NAPC because we all need to be reminded. Our identity, our sense of worth, the meaning of our lives, our calling in the world—all of these flow from the content of the Gospel.

• List below several verbs Paul uses in verses 1 and 2. Do your best to define what each of them means in their context. (Hint: there are 5)

• What in the text makes it clear that Paul is doing something different than developing a myth or telling a story?

• What is the content of the Gospel that Paul summarizes in verses 3 and 4?

• How does the weekly reminder of the Gospel in Sunday worship help you in your relationship with God? How does it help you in your life outside of church?

• What source predicted and explained this Gospel before it happened, and why is this important?

/// READ 2 TIMOTHY 4:1-5 OUT LOUD.

Paul also wrote this personal letter to his protégé, Timothy, who was trained by Paul to take over his ministry. This is very likely his final letter, written from prison as he awaited execution. Chapter 4 of 2 Timothy contains some of the most important and poignant personal exhortations we have in all of Paul's writings.

• Why do you think Paul begins this chapter by reminding Timothy that Jesus is the One who will “judge the living and the dead?”

• The command Timothy receives is to “preach the word.” The Greek for “word” is *logos*, which has very rich and evocative meanings. It can be defined as word, speech, organizing principle, and of course it personifies Jesus Christ himself. Look up the following passages, each of which provide further context for the meaning of *logos*, and then discuss them briefly:

- Genesis 1:1-3 (the entire chapter actually conveys importance of speech)
- Exodus 20:1-19
- Ezekiel 37:1-6
- John 1:1-5, 14
- Romans 10:17

• How does this kind of “preaching the word,” the *logos*, differ from sharing an opinion or one viewpoint among many?

Week 3

WHAT MAKES IT A CHURCH:

PART I: BIBLICAL PREACHING

• What does it mean to be ready “in season and out of season”? Can you give an example of each in your life when you were able to teach about Jesus in some way?

• Define these words: reprove, rebuke, exhort. Then, discuss how they relate to one another.

• As you read the instructions given to Timothy, especially in verses 2-5, describe an overall picture of what our posture should be as we preach and teach the Word, both as a church, and individually, in our lives and families?

• **How do you prepare to worship and hear the Word of God on Sundays? If it is truly this important, does your preparation reflect this?**

Often, we seriously neglect the importance of preparing to worship and hear the Word of God in church on Sunday. This week, change your Saturday evening habits in these ways:

- **SHARE** — Decide with members of your small group to meet at church earlier than normal, sharing the effort to prepare for worship well.
- **READ** — Go through 1 Corinthians 15:1-6 again and remind yourself of the Gospel in preparation for hearing and applying it on Sunday.
- **PRAY** — Ask God to prepare you to hear from him, and that you would be sensitive and open to his Word.
- **CHANGE** — Decide what clothes you'll wear and which service you will attend. Go to bed early so you won't be tired in worship. Get up early and spend time in prayer. Get to church early, bring your Bible and pen, and be ready right when the service begins.

TAKEAWAY

Without Christ-centered, Biblical preaching, the church fails to be the church. Proper preaching begins with the Word and proclaims what it says, not our opinions on topics nor what we might wish it said. This takes discipline (both to preach it and to receive it), but the benefits are numerous—God's Word will not return void or empty. (Isaiah 55:11)

“The preacher must aim to stand under Scripture, not over it, and to allow it, so to speak, to talk through him, delivering what is not so much his message as its.”

- J.I. Packer

IT'S GO TIME

Richard Baxter, an English pastor of the 1600's, wrote about the role of the listener as the sermon is preached:

“Make it your work with diligence to apply the Word as you are hearing it ... Cast not all upon the minister, as those that will go no further than they are carried as by force ... You have work to do as well as the preacher ... you must open your mouths and digest [the Word], for another cannot digest it for you ... therefore be all the while at work, and abhor an idle heart in hearing, as well as an idle minister.”

Week 3

WHAT MAKES IT A CHURCH:

PART I: BIBLICAL PREACHING

ST. JOHN.

CHAP. XX.

38 And after these things Joseph of Arimathea (because he was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews) besought Pilate that he might take away the body of JESUS. And Pilate gave leave. He came therefore, and took away the body of JESUS.

39 And Nicodemus also came, (he who at the first came to JESUS by night), bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about an hundred pound weight.

40 They took therefore the body of JESUS, and bound it in linen clothes, with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.

41 Now there was in the place where he was crucified, a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein no man yet had been laid.

42 There, therefore, because of the parasceve of the Jews, they laid JESUS, because the sepulchre was nigh at hand.

CHAPTER XX.

Christ's resurrection and manifestation to his disciples.

AND on the first day of the week, Mary Mag-

^a Matt. 27. 57; Mark 15. 43;

^b Luke 23. 50. — ^b Supra 3. 2.

^c Matt. 28. 1; Mark 16. 1;

^d Luke 24. 3.

dalen cometh it was yet dark, sepulchre; and she saw the stone taken away from the sepulchre.

2 She ran, therefore, and cometh to Simon Peter, and to the other disciple whom JESUS loved, and saith to them: They have taken away the Lord out of the sepulchre, and we know not where they have laid him.

3 Peter therefore went out, and that other disciple, and they came to the sepulchre.

4 And they both ran together, and that other disciple did outrun Peter, and came first to the sepulchre.

5 And when he stooped down, he saw the linen clothes lying; but yet he went not in.

6 Then cometh Simon Peter following him, and went into the sepulchre, and saw the linen clothes lying,

7 And the napkin that had been about his head, not lying with the linen clothes, but apart, wrapped up into one place.

8 Then that other disciple also went in, who came first to the sepulchre; and he saw, and believed.

WHAT MAKES IT A CHURCH?

Part II: Sacraments

Week 4

/// BIG IDEAS

The Sacraments of the church are special practices instituted by Jesus himself. Administering them properly obeys Jesus and presents the Gospel to the world.

LET'S GET STARTED

The second “birthmark,” the *Sacraments*, are two special practices of the church: Baptism and the Lord’s Supper (also called Communion). These were originally instituted by Jesus, but both have a connection to the Old Testament traditions as well.

The word “*sacrament*” refers to something sacred and mysterious, which helps explain why they are often confusing to Christians. Churches themselves tend to ascribe them either far too much weight (believing God’s grace comes only through the Sacraments) or far too little weight (believing the Sacraments are not special, but just a memorial). The Biblical perspective on the Sacraments is different than both these extremes. Sacraments are “means of grace”—they are special methods by which our God confirms his gift of grace to us and grows our faith by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is important that we understand the what and the why of the Sacraments in order to avoid their becoming solely rote, ritualistic practices that lose the grace-giving and life-transforming power that Jesus intended for them to have.

FOCUS YOUR MIND

• When you participate in the Lord’s Supper in church, what goes through your mind while you do it? Is it different at NAPC than in your prior church(es)?

• Share your religious background related to Baptism (i.e. Infants or believers only, method used, etc.) and its level of importance to you.

ROUNDTABLE

Last week, we looked at Paul’s letter to the troubled church in Corinth—a church sitting within a city filled with commerce and on the leading edge of Greek society. This society had many pagan (i.e. “religious”) traditions mixed within its culture, and those practices inevitably found their way into the church, even to

the Lord's table. Let's look at how Paul exhorts the Corinthian church to change their practice of and motivation for the Lord's Supper.

/// READ 1 CORINTHIANS 11:23-32 OUT LOUD.

• **From where (or whom) did Paul receive his knowledge and understanding of the Lord's Supper? Why does this matter and what does it mean for us today?**

• **This is the passage Pastor David most often quotes and paraphrases when we take Communion at NAPC, specifically verses 23-26. Do you notice anything new in reading those verses that you haven't in the past?**

/// READ MATTHEW 26:19, 26-28 OUT LOUD.

The Old Testament "feast" of Passover was a remembrance and celebration of God's rescue of his people from slavery in Egypt (see Exodus 12 & 13). All the Israelites were instructed to kill and consume a spotless lamb, spreading its blood on the doorposts of their houses. That night, God killed every firstborn child in all of Egypt, except for those who had taken shelter under the blood of the lamb. The Lord "passed over" those houses and spared the firstborn of each family.

• **Jesus instituted the Lord's Supper during the celebration of Passover. What are the similarities between these two "feasts" in terms of their significance and the people present?**

Each of the Sacraments contains the "sign" and the "seal" of God's promise to his people.

Every observance of the Passover and every lamb whose blood was spilled for sin was a *sign* that pointed to the final, perfect Lamb of God whose blood was spilled on the cross. In the ancient world, the owner of property would mark it by affixing his *seal* to it. In that way, the Passover was a *seal* of God's ownership of the Israelites—a mark that they belonged to him (see Exodus 13:1-2). The Lord's Supper is a *seal* that similarly marks us as belonging to God because it is only for Christians.

• **In verses 27-32, Paul speaks of not taking Communion "in an unworthy manner," that we "examine" ourselves first, and that if we fail to do so we are "drinking judgment on" ourselves. He even says some have died from doing so! Based on what we've already discussed, what might Paul mean by all this?**

• Many people find limiting the Lord's Supper to believers alone to be too restrictive. Instead of looking at it that way, how does it actually present an opportunity for outreach to unbelievers?

• Churches differ as to how the body and blood of Jesus are involved in Communion. Jesus says "This is my body which is for you" in verse 24. What do Catholics and Eastern Orthodox believe about the bread and the cup? How does this differ from what Protestants believe?

• Discuss the implications this should have for how we think about and how we practice the Lord's Supper.

Week 4

WHAT MAKES IT A CHURCH:

PART II: SACRAMENTS

/// READ MATTHEW 28:18-20 OUT LOUD.

In what is known as the Great Commission, Jesus gives the church its mission: to make disciples of all nations. He includes within that the important Sacrament of Baptism. While baptisms were being done by others (including John the Baptist) prior to Christ's death and resurrection, it took on new meaning and was a command for the early church. Let's look at the Great Commission together and then examine what the Bible says about the practice of Baptism for us today.

• Based on the passage, in which is Jesus speaking, why do we have the Sacrament of Baptism?

• This passage also provides guidance for how we baptize. What does it say about that?

• Like the Lord's Supper, Baptism also has a connection to an Old Testament practice: circumcision. I know, seems weird... but you'll do an exercise together with your small group to see the connection.

• When we baptize at NAPC (and in the EPC denomination), the congregation makes a commitment as well. What is your role toward newly baptized persons as a member of NAPC, and why is that important?

• *Paedobaptism* is the practice of baptizing the children of believing parents, while *believer baptism* is the practice of baptizing someone who has already professed their faith in Christ. In thinking about the prior passages, which concept of Baptism do they support? (Extra Credit: Check out Acts 10:47-48, 16:15, 30-34, 18:8, and 1 Corinthians 1:16, 7:14.)

• Our church primarily baptizes by sprinkling. Is there a particular mode of Baptism (sprinkling, pouring or immersion) that you prefer? Explain.

• Think about Baptism, no matter the mode or whether it is for an infant or a believer. In any case, how does it provide a picture of and an opportunity to share the Gospel?

Like the Lord's Supper, Baptism has both "sign" and "seal" components. Every circumcision among the Israelites pointed to the new *sign* of the washing away of sins pictured through Baptism. And, through Baptism, God marks his ownership of his people with a *seal* as he pledges current and future blessings to his faithful followers. This is in part why Baptism is not a private event, but a public proclamation made in front of the body of believers—the church.

TAKEAWAY

The Sacraments are far more than odd, ritualistic practices that we “just do” because we’re in church. They are special practices instituted by Jesus that function as both a sign of what God has done for us and a seal that marks our ownership by him. We should approach the Sacraments with reverence (because of what they represent) and also with joy (because Jesus is spiritually present in a special way).

“Wherever we find the Word of God surely preached and heard, and the Sacraments administered according to the institution of Christ, there, it is not to be doubted, is a church of God.”

- John Calvin

IT'S GO TIME

- **SHARE** — Discuss either of the Sacraments with another person this week (someone not part of your small group), and explain how it represents the Gospel.
- **READ** — Go through all the extra passages listed throughout the study this week. Consider how they inform your view of the Sacraments.
- **PRAY** — Thank God for the gift of his Sacraments, and ask him to overwhelm you with his spiritual presence the next time you take Communion.
- **CHANGE** — Think back to your answers to the Focus Your Mind section. Having now been through this study, in what ways do your beliefs about Communion or Baptism need to change?

Week 4

WHAT MAKES IT A CHURCH:

PART II: SACRAMENTS



WHAT MAKES IT A CHURCH?

Part III: Church Discipline

Week 5

/// BIG IDEAS

The church must practice two types of Biblical discipline: formative and corrective, which together form the basis of discipleship.

LET'S GET STARTED

The past two weeks, we looked at two “birthmarks” of the church: Christ-centered, Biblical preaching and the Sacraments. This week we turn our attention to the final (and often most misunderstood) “birthmark” of the church: church discipline.

The word “discipline” raises pictures in our head that range from slightly uncomfortable to unduly cruel. Most of us do not jump at the chance to be disciplined for something, and many of us even try to avoid having to render discipline to another person. Discipline in the church is quite different than what lives in our minds, but it is absolutely necessary for our spiritual growth.

In this study we will examine the two types of church discipline. The first is *formative discipline*. Formative discipline is the process of bringing people to maturity in Christ through instruction and teaching. The second is *corrective discipline*. This type of discipline is used to correct a church member who is practicing unrepentant sin. We will see that rendering either type of discipline but abandoning the other fails to satisfy the purposes of the church.

FOCUS YOUR MIND

• Share with the group a time when you received discipline in any context. Was it a positive or negative experience?

ROUNDTABLE

Like the word discipleship, the word discipline comes from the same Latin word *discipulus*, which means to teach and instruct. So, although the word discipline may have a scary connotation, discipline is for the purpose of training us and is, therefore, ultimately for our good. Because we are sinners on a journey toward holiness, it is something we certainly need.

/// READ 2 TIMOTHY 2:1-2 OUT LOUD.

• Paul is communicating to his protégé, Timothy. In light of that and what he says, which type of discipline is represented here?

• In what ways do we practice formative discipline at NAPC?

• Consider the answers shared in the prior question. Which of these avenues of formative discipline have taught you the most?

• Have you been well disciplined to do the 4 S's? Which ones can you do better?

In the passage, we can see four spiritual generations represented: (1) Paul, who teaches (2) Timothy, who should teach (3) faithful people, who will teach (4) others. Formative discipline involves the growth of a Christian for the sake of (in part) God using that growth to grow other Christians, and so on.

• **Time for a formative discipline exercise where you're the teacher. Turn to the person next to you and share one fact or statement you've learned that has helped in your growth as a Christian. How and where did you learn that?**

/// READ 1 CORINTHIANS 5:1-5 OUT LOUD.

We will now switch our focus to the concept of corrective discipline. This form of discipline may be more difficult for many of us to discuss because it involves recognizing our sinfulness and submitting to the authority of the church.

• **Who is Paul speaking (writing) to in these verses?**

• **NAPC stresses the 4 disciplines expected of membership—called the “4 S's.” Does anyone remember them?”**

• **What sin issue does Paul address and what corrective discipline does he say should be rendered?**

• Why is the church in Corinth told to do this? (Hint: see “so that” in verse 5)

• Think back to prior weeks when we saw the church was the Body of Christ and the branches of the Vine. How do these metaphors help us understand why Paul would instruct them to remove this man from the church family?

Carrying out corrective discipline can be very difficult. It requires humility coupled with consistency and careful, pastoral explanation. Because of that, many churches simply just avoid it.

• Is it more caring and loving to exercise corrective discipline when appropriate or to simply turn a blind eye? Why?

Week 5

WHAT MAKES IT A CHURCH: --- PART III: CHURCH DISCIPLINE

/// READ MATTHEW 18:15-17 OUT LOUD.

• Do you see yourself as having the ability to confront someone about sin in their life? Why is this so difficult for so many of us? (Extra credit: Read 1 Corinthians 5:9-12)

• What would happen if we avoided confronting a brother or sister in sin because of the fact that we are all sinners?

• Put the process described here for confronting sin in your own words.

• We have talked about the benefit to the individual member to experience corrective discipline. How does the rest of the congregation benefit as well?

• Paul says the final step is to remove the person from the church, but he says to do this by treating the person as a “Gentile and a tax collector.” What does that mean?

TAKEAWAY

Discipline is difficult and uncomfortable. Yet, the truth is, both formative and corrective discipline are necessary for our Christian growth—repentance and sanctification. When believers commit to membership, they are to submit themselves to the discipline of the church, and the church owes it to them to render that discipline whenever appropriate in care for their souls.

• Think back to the lesson on membership from Week 2. How does the church have the authority to remove someone, or to even exercise corrective discipline in any capacity?

“ Church discipline is neither popular nor a common practice in the church ... Its absence indicates that people have lost sight of the love and tenderness that is always to be behind it and of its necessity if those who err are to be restored.”

- Alistair Begg

IT'S GO TIME

- **SHARE** — Approach someone in the church you are close with and ask them to hold you accountable related to a struggle of sin in your life. If you don't have someone like this, approach your small group leader and have them help you find someone.
- **READ** — Go through all of 1 Corinthians 5, remembering that Paul was talking to a church. Consider how this should inform NAPC's practice of church discipline.

Week 5

WHAT MAKES IT A CHURCH: PART III: CHURCH DISCIPLINE

- **PRAY** — Ask God to reveal sin in your heart (whether un-Biblical beliefs or sinful habits) that if it continues should be subject to church discipline. Now repent and ask him for forgiveness.
- **CHANGE** — What attitude do you hold (toward either type of discipline) that needs to change after this study? Take a step to do that, such as coming to EQUIP or establishing a 1:1 discipleship relationship.



WHO LEADS THE CHURCH?

Week 6

WHO LEADS THE CHURCH?

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

/// BIG IDEAS

Elders and deacons are the officers of the church with the specific roles of servant leadership and compassionate care.

LET'S GET STARTED

Quality leadership is important. Without clear and effective leadership—whether in an organization, a group or a family—there will be no unity of purpose and direction. In God's church, which is both an organization and a family, Jesus is the ultimate leader. We have already seen that Christ is the head and the church is his body (see Ephesians 1:22-23 and Colossians 1:18).

Underneath Christ, local churches take different approaches to their earthly leadership. Some are “top-down,” where national or global-level leaders set the direction of the church that filters all the way down to each local congregation. Others are fully “bottom-up,” where the members of the congregation vote on every decision for the local church (i.e. What brand of coffee for fellowship time?)

As a Presbyterian church, NAPC takes a different position than both of those. From the Greek word “*presbyteros*”—meaning “elder led”—Presbyterian churches have two primary offices of earthly leaders for Christ's church, both of which are elected by the members: *elders* and *deacons*. Elders are responsible for direction and oversight. Together with the head Pastor (called the “Teaching Elder” in our EPC denomination), the currently serving elders exercise spiritual leadership, governance and discipline. Deacons provide prayer and care for the church by reaching out to newcomers and those who are in need, both within and outside the congregation. Our deacons pray for our people and serve behind the scenes.

This week, we will see what the Bible teaches about each church officer role and learn how we as members and attendees can support these leaders.

FOCUS YOUR MIND

- Give an example of a great leader from the world (business, political or otherwise). What made he or she a great leader in your mind?

ROUNDTABLE

- What would you think of as the qualities of a great church leader?

/// READ TITUS 1:5-9 AND 1 TIMOTHY 3:4-5 OUT LOUD.

• **What are the Biblical qualities for elders (also called overseers)? List as many as you can.**

• **What is the name for the leadership group that includes the current Ruling Elders together with the Teaching Elder?**

• **Compare these qualities with those you listed in the Focus Your Mind section. Is there overlap?**

Take a few moments and review the “Role of an Elder” document. This is presented to every potential elder at NAPC, along with the Titus and 1 Timothy passages, and they are asked to carefully consider the responsibility which they’re assuming.

• **Looking at the *Role of an Elder* document, specifically the “Elder Responsibilities” and “Requirements of an Elder” sections, do you see anything that stands out or surprises you?**

Paul is the writer of both of these letters, each written to one of his disciples (Titus and Timothy). As these younger ministers take up the task of leading their churches, Paul stresses, with almost the same words to each, the characteristics that should be present in any person who may be elevated to leadership.

• **Does anyone know what two types of elders we have at NAPC? What are the differences between the two?**

/// READ ACTS 6:1-7 OUT LOUD.

Now we will turn our attention to deacons and their responsibilities. In this passage, we see the creation of the first group of deacons, the need for them and the important purpose they serve.

- Who was it that identified the need for deacons?
Why was there a need?

Week 6

WHO LEADS THE CHURCH?

Take a few moments and review the “Role of a Deacon” document. This is presented to every potential deacon at NAPC, along with the 1 Timothy passage, and they are asked to carefully consider the responsibility which they’re assuming.

- What key qualities did they look for in deacons?

- Looking at the *Role of a Deacon* document, specifically the “Deacon Responsibilities” and “Additional Requirements” sections, do you see anything that stands out or surprises you?

- There is one more leader (non-officer) group at the church. Do you know what it is and what they do?

/// READ 1 TIMOTHY 3:8-13 OUT LOUD.

- What are the Biblical qualities for deacons? Please pull out as many as you can.

- Do you find the idea of elders (including pastors) and deacons intimidating? How so? What can you do to move past this feeling?

- **Can you name some of the current elders and deacons?**

- **Provide examples of your relationships and/or interactions with elders and deacons at NAPC. Describe your interactions.**

Being a leader of any kind in the church (especially an officer) is a difficult and demanding task. Every time a person takes a step closer to Jesus, he or she often finds that the attacks of Satan increase. This is because Satan cannot take away our salvation (that was made final by Jesus's cross and resurrection), and so he will try instead to make us ineffective in ministry and to take away our joy.

- **In what ways can you as a member / attender at NAPC support the leaders?**

/// READ HEBREWS 13:17 OUT LOUD.

There is another thing that can be done to support your church leaders. Consider what it means to submit to the authority of the leadership of the church. Think back to prior lessons on membership and discipline (Weeks 2 and 5) as you discuss the next few questions.

- **What does it mean to “submit to church leadership?” What are the challenges and advantages of doing so?**

/// READ 1 TIMOTHY 2:1-3 OUT LOUD.

- **Why does it say we are to pray for our leaders (of all types)? How can you do that at NAPC?**

/// READ 1 JOHN 4:1 OUT LOUD.

There is one more thing we need to do for our leaders, and it is something we might not immediately guess.

• What does this verse call us to do in relation to church leaders? Why is that important?

Week 6

WHO LEADS THE CHURCH?

TAKEAWAY

The leaders of the church—elders, deacons and staff—are crucial to setting and carrying out the vision of the church in line with the mission that God has set for us. As members and attenders, we must support the important work of our leaders by getting to know them, praying for them, submitting to them and checking what they teach against Scripture.

“ A true and safe leader is likely to be one who has no desire to lead, but is forced into a position of leadership by the inward pressure of the Holy Spirit and the press of the external situation.”

- A.W. Tozer

IT'S GO TIME

- **SHARE** — Reach out to a leader at NAPC this week and encourage them, thanking them for what they do for the church. Let them know how their work has affected you.
- **READ** — Review the Elder and Deacon Role documents and consider serving as an officer at NAPC, examining which office best fits your skills.
- **PRAY** — Ask God to bless our leaders and to reveal to you how you can practically support them in their work and properly submit to their authority.
- **CHANGE** — Think about what you should do differently now after learning about the leaders of our church. Whether it relates to prayer, support, submission or otherwise, go do it.



WHO DOES THE WORK OF THE CHURCH?

Week 7

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

WHO DOES THE WORK OF THE CHURCH?

/// BIG IDEAS

The work of the Biblical church is not done primarily by paid clergy, or even by elders or deacons. Instead, the leaders of the church are to equip all members to do the work of ministry.

LET'S GET STARTED

Way back in our first week together, we discussed that the work of the church is evangelism and discipleship. Then, in last week's study, we talked about the many responsibilities of our church leaders, elders and deacons, as well as the staff. With all that the leaders of NAPC do, we might find ourselves wondering: Is there anything left for the members of the congregation to do? This is an important question, and the answer is yes.

Because we are the Body of Christ, every member of the church is called to play a role and do his/her part, whether that member is a leader or not. Every member should be deeply engaged in the work of the local church, so that there is not a "leaders-produce-while-members-consume" model.

This week, we will look together at how the Bible instructs us to carry out the important work of the church—evangelism and discipleship—through the lives of each and every member.

FOCUS YOUR MIND

- What first comes to mind when you hear the word "saint?"

ROUNDTABLE

Paul's letter to the church in Ephesus is one of his most masterful works, covering topics from salvation to spiritual warfare and everything in between. In chapter 4, he unpacks how the church should function so that every member of the Body of Christ is involved. What he says may challenge our preconceived notions about the work of the church.

/// READ EPHESIANS 4:7-16 OUT LOUD.

- In verse 11, Paul lists the titles of many leaders given by God to the church. What are they and what do they mean?

• Which one of those leadership categories is no longer around? Why do you think that is the case?

• Based on those verses above and considering its usage in Ephesians 4, describe the Biblical meaning of the term “*saint*” in your own words.

• We have already listed what each of these leadership categories does in the church. But more generally, what do they all do?

• If every follower of Jesus is a *saint*, then according to verse 12 that means that every Christian should be doing the “work of ministry.” Is this how you think about the responsibility of every person in the church?

• Consider this overarching purpose of leaders: to equip. Do you personally have other expectations for our pastors and teachers? Should you?

• What does it mean to be “*equipped*?”

The group of people who the leaders are supposed to equip are referred to as “*saints*.” Let’s see how the Bible describes who a *saint* truly is by looking at these verses together.

/// READ ACTS 9:13, PSALM 34:9 AND ROMANS 8:27 OUT LOUD.

Think about how this all ties together. When we understand that every Christian is supposed to be doing ministry—evangelism and discipleship—then it makes sense that every convert is called to become a member of a local church. Without the commitment of membership, which involves undergoing formative and corrective discipline, no person would be equipped to do such important work.

• Read through verses 13-16 again. Pull out the words that describe a saint who has been equipped.

• Look at how this applies to the church in those same verses. How does it describe an equipped church of saints?

• If you've ever been part of any team where people have different styles, approaches and gifts, then you know things get messy! Should we expect a different result in the church? Why or why not?

Week 7

WHO DOES THE WORK OF THE CHURCH?

/// READ ROMANS 8:26-28 OUT LOUD.

Often times in our Christian life we find ourselves thrust into situations for which we don't feel prepared. The interesting balance of walking with Jesus is realizing two things are true at the same time: We must seek to become more equipped so that we are better prepared for the work of ministry, but we also must not wait to do ministry until we feel "fully" prepared. If we did that, we would always have a reason to wait. Remember, God trains the called; he does not call the trained.

• Have you ever been asked to do something at church and not felt equipped for the task? How did you deal with that situation?

• What does God really expect of us in order to be "ready" to do ministry?

- Of the different options for equipping at NAPC, which have been beneficial to you?

- Go around the room right now and share with each other the gifts for ministry you see in one another.

IT'S GO TIME

- **SHARE** — Look back at the final question and think about the people in your group. Who now, after the lesson, comes to your mind? Call them this week or send them a note to encourage them by explaining the gifts for ministry you see in them.
- **READ** — Read the entire book of Ephesians this week. With all that Paul says about the church, meditate on how crucial it is that all the saints engage in ministry.
- **PRAY** — Ask God to place on your heart someone who you should minister to today. Reach out to that person and then pray for them.
- **CHANGE** — Now that you know that all Christians are saints and that all saints are to engage in the work of ministry, choose a new ministry avenue and step into it. Even if it feels scary, trust God by taking this step of faith.

TAKEAWAY

Members of the church have relationships with people and are part of circles of influence that some church leaders may never reach. For that reason, ministry was never meant to be just for the paid clergy or the “super spiritual.” God has brilliantly designed his church so that leaders equip all members to do the work of ministry—evangelism and discipleship. Glory be to God!

“ All believers are equally important to the healthy functioning of the church. In the final analysis, Christian ministry is ‘every-member ministry.’”

— R.C. Sproul

Week 7

**WHO DOES THE
WORK OF THE CHURCH?**



WHAT IF
THERE
WERE NO
CHURCH?

Week 8

/// BIG IDEAS

The church exists to witness to God's glory in the world. It does not exist for itself. This witness to those outside the church should be most evident in our love for one another inside the church.

LET'S GET STARTED

Lots of organizations do lots of good. In just a few minutes searching the internet, you can find plenty of nonprofits doing really great things all over the world. With all this good being done, is the church even necessary? Is there anything unique about the church? Would the world be all that different if there never even was a church? These are fair and important questions.

Over these past seven weeks, we have read, studied, discussed and grown in our understanding of this thing we call the "church." We have learned it is not a building, but is the Body of Christ. We have seen that this requires some level of formal organization (membership and leadership), but it also requires that every member get their hands dirty and do their part (all engaged in the work of ministry). We have discovered what makes a church, well, a church: Biblical preaching, proper administration of the Sacraments, and effective church discipline.

This week, we are going to close out this study by examining the uniqueness of the church—that crucial element that would be missing from this world if the church never existed. The church's unique mission is *witness*, which is driven by its unique characteristic of Biblical *love*. To *witness* is to give evidence of something by testifying to the truth of it. To *love* (as Jesus teaches in the Bible) is a commitment to care for and serve others (inside and outside the church). When the Body of Christ *loves* well it becomes a *witness* to the truth of the Gospel, and that shines the light of Jesus into a world in darkness.

FOCUS YOUR MIND

Here's an activity for everyone. Draw a large heart somewhere on your paper (bonus points for Valentine-level quality). Inside it, write down all the people, things or whatever that you love!

ROUNDTABLE

Christ's earthly ministry ended with his ascension back to the Father prior to the sending of the Holy Spirit. This was a special moment when the whole, fledgling church was gathered together, receiving their mission from the risen Savior. He tells them what to do and how to do it.

/// READ ACTS 1:6-9 OUT LOUD.

• **The disciples wanted to know when Jesus would restore the "kingdom of God" and deliver Israel from being ruled by the Romans. What is the difference between the kingdom they desired and the one Jesus was putting in place?**

• **Have someone read Luke 17:20-21. Where does Jesus say the Kingdom of God is to be found?**

• **List some adjectives describing how you think the disciples may have felt at this moment. Are there times in your ministry and service at NAPC when you feel the same way?**

• **Connect the dots. Does it make sense to learn that the kingdom of God is within God's people based on what we now know of the church? Why?**

• **Given how the disciples probably felt at this moment, how were they qualified and empowered to do this?**

• **What mission does Jesus give his new church members before he ascends to the Father?**

• **Look at where he tells them to be witnesses. What is the progression Jesus sets forth?**

- What might it look like for NAPC to follow this model in our context?

We have considered where we are to be witnesses, so now let's turn our attention to how we do it. We know that it is only possible by the power of the Holy Spirit, but it also must be carried out in Biblical love.

/// READ JOHN 13:34-35 OUT LOUD.

- In this passage, Jesus tells his disciples to love one another. There is a word we use for when God tells us to do something—we call it a *commandment*. Does the idea of being commanded to love sound strange to you? Why or why not?

- Look back at your heart exercise from Focus Your Mind. What is the reason you listed those things—because you are commanded to love them or because you just feel love for them?

Week 8

WHAT IF THERE WERE NO CHURCH?

This does not mean it is bad or wrong to feel closeness, romance or connection to someone. It simply means that is not the Biblical love that Jesus is commanding of us here. What he calls us to is something quite different when he commands that we love one another.

- What standard does he give for how they should love one another?

- In your own words, describe how Jesus loved us.

- How is this standard for love different from our typical conception of love, like from the Focus Your Mind section?

• **Practically speaking, what might it look like to love one another as Jesus loved us?**

• **Can you think of an example in our church where you have seen love for one another function as a witness for the Gospel? Share it with the group.**

• **Jesus says it is by loving one another that others will know we are his disciples. How do you think this could be the case?**

/// READ EPHESIANS 4:1-6 OUT LOUD.

To close out our study, we will talk about the Biblical concept of *unity*, thinking about how this relates to witness and love for one another. When we love one another well, we can present a unified witness for Jesus.

• **Based on the other passages we just read, what is the “calling to which we’ve been called” as the church?**

Now, let’s really try to put these two concepts together—*witness* and *love*—by putting these two passages together. Jesus says his disciples are witnesses to the truth of the Gospel and they are those who love one another. This means loving one another as Jesus loved us actually serves as a witness to the truth of the Gospel.

• **Discuss why it’s not possible to be effective witnesses for Jesus if we fail to love one another. Also, discuss how loving one another well can serve as an effective witness for the Gospel.**

• **Paul tells us to be eager to maintain *unity*. What does he say are the things that unite us?**

• How might loving one another tie into maintaining this unity?

• Think back over all our references to the Body of Christ. In light of that, does Paul mean *unity* in the sense of sameness or uniformity? How do you know?

• What must he mean by *unity* instead?

TAKEAWAY

In many ways, the very idea of the church is counterintuitive. God the Father, by the power of the Holy Spirit, puts a bunch of people together from all different walks of life (even from different corners of the globe). He does it for the purpose of creating a unified witness to the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And, this witness is best evidenced in the way the members of the church love one another.

Week 8

WHAT IF THERE WERE NO CHURCH?

This is why, if we truly love Jesus, we will naturally love the church. The church should be in the middle of the heart we drew. The church is the Body of Christ. We cannot have the head without the body. Loving Jesus means loving, caring for, struggling alongside, witnessing with and growing together as the church. May the church never stray from its mission to witness to the love of our blessed Savior and Lord!

“ People won’t know you are a disciple of Jesus if you make no profession of faith in Jesus. But if you declare yourself openly to be a disciple of Jesus ... then your love for others will be decisive in showing that you are real.”

- John Piper

IT'S GO TIME

• **SHARE** — Share love and witness with someone else at NAPC by ministering alongside them in a context not natural to you. This could mean serving in Linden, joining the next session of EQUIP, or serving as accountability partners together.

• **READ** — Read 1 Corinthians 13 as you meditate on the study this week. Make a list of all the ways love should permeate who we are as a church.

• **PRAY** — Ask God to bring to mind someone at the church who you don't naturally love (whether personality differences or otherwise). Then, commit to loving them with one specific act this week.

• **CHANGE** — For many of us, the idea of being a witness seems daunting and difficult to do in a loving way. Write down the names of two people you love who need Jesus. Overcome your hesitation and share the Gospel with them.

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