

What Is the Church?

Crucial Questions

R. C. SPROUL

What Is the Church?

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Chapter One

The Church Is One

In the seventeenth chapter of John's gospel, Jesus gives the most extensive prayer that is recorded for us in the New Testament. It is a prayer of intercession in which He prayed for His disciples and for all who would believe through the testimony of the disciples. That prayer is called Jesus' High Priestly Prayer. One of the central themes of that prayer is Christ's request to the Father that His people might be one. It was a prayer for Christian unity. Yet here we are, in the twenty-first century, and the church is probably more

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fragmented than at any time in church history. We've seen a crisis with the question, "What is the church after all?"

Historically, via the ancient church council of Nicea, the church has been defined by four key words. It is, 1) one, 2) holy, 3) catholic, and 4) apostolic. As we study the nature of the church, I want to look at these four descriptive categories as they define the nature of the church.

First of all, the church is one. Really? If we surveyed the landscape of modern-day Christianity, the last word we might use to describe it would be *one* or *unified*.

How are we to understand and respond to Christ's prayer for the unity of the church and for the ancient church's declaration that the church is one? There have been different approaches to this throughout history. In the twentieth century there was what has been labeled "the ecumenical movement." This was an attempt through the World Council of Churches and other bodies to move in the direction of forming or reforming denominational splinter groups into one centralized, ecclesiastical body. The whole goal of the ecumenical movement was to restore unity to the visible church. One of the things that we saw as a result of this push toward unity was an increasing number of mergers between denominations that formerly

were divided. Unfortunately, what often happens when two churches or denominations merge is that certain people don't agree with the merger, and they leave the newly formed organization to create a new organization that aligns with their values. So, in their effort to have fewer churches through unification, these movements simply create more churches.

In addition, another problem has emerged. This is the problem of pluralism. Pluralism is a philosophy that allows for a wide diversity of viewpoints and doctrines to co-exist within a single body. Because so many doctrinal disputes have emerged within some churches, they have tried to keep the peace and unity, and at the same time accommodate differing views within the church. It is an attempt to accommodate conflicting viewpoints.

As the church becomes more pluralistic, the number of contradictory viewpoints that are tolerated increases. In turn, organizational and structural unity become the central concern. People strive to keep the church visibly united at all costs. However, there is always a price tag for that, and historically, the price tag has been the confessional purity of the churches.

When the Protestant movement began in the sixteenth

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and seventeenth centuries, confessions were created. These were creedal statements that set forth the doctrines that were embraced and confessed by these particular churches. For the most part, these confessional documents summarize the core tenets of what it means to be a Christian—things such as a belief in the Trinity, Christ as one person with two natures, and the bodily resurrection. For centuries, Protestantism was defined by the body of doctrine that was confessed by each organization. But in our day, part of the impact of the ecumenical movement has been the relativizing of these older confessions. In addition, an attempt is made in some churches to broaden the confessional basis along the lines of pluralism in order to achieve the unity of the visible church.

If you are a part of a church, why do you belong there? For quite some time now, I have noticed that people have a tendency to flip between denominations. The tendency is to go where they like the pastor, the preaching, the music, or a particular program. Oftentimes, people feel comfortable moving from denomination to denomination or from church home to church home. Sadly, we rarely find people paying attention to what the church believes. When the church was called to unity in the New Testament, however,

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we must remember that the Apostle Paul spoke of unity in these terms: one Lord, one faith, and one baptism. This unity is not something that is merely superficial in terms of being a unified organization or a unified methodology, but first and foremost, it is a unified confession of faith in the person and work of Christ. And second, the content of that confession is to be agreed upon. Sadly, the church's unity has been broken precisely where unity is supposed to be found, namely, unity in the Apostolic gospel.

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A building with a steeple and stained glass windows?

When the word *church* is mentioned, many people think of a building. Others think of a denomination. But the church is so much more.

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul explains that the church is a group of people, not a building. These Christians make up the universal family of God and are called to live lives that glorify Him. Beginning with one of the church's earliest statements of faith, Dr. Sproul takes an in-depth look at the "one, holy, catholic, and Apostolic" church.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

Dr. R.C. Sproul was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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