LEGACY CHURCH

The Church

A Position Paper of Legacy Church

Introduction

The church is not a building, an institution, and not a weekly event. It is a people. Specifically, it is the people of God, called out of the world, gathered around Jesus Christ, and sent back into the world as His witnesses. It is the community through which God is currently making visible the reality of His kingdom, the body through which Christ continues to act in history, and the family in which redeemed human beings learn together what it means to be human as God designed humanity to be.

Few things have been more abused, more misunderstood, or more taken for granted in Western Christianity than the church. It has been reduced to a service people attend, a community they sample and compare, a resource they draw from when they need it and set aside when they do not. The individualism of our culture has produced a generation of Christians who believe they can follow Jesus without belonging to His body, who see the church as optional rather than essential, and who treat church membership as a consumer choice rather than a covenant commitment.

Scripture does not allow this. From Genesis to Revelation, God's redemptive purpose is not simply to save individuals but to form a people. The entire biblical story moves toward a community, a city, a bride, a new humanity gathered from every tribe and tongue and nation to worship the Lamb. The church is not peripheral to that purpose. It is central to it.

This paper addresses the nature, identity, and purpose of the church. A fuller treatment of church leadership and polity is found in our separate position paper on that subject. Here we focus on what the church is, why it exists, and how Legacy Church understands its calling within the one church of Jesus Christ.

I

Old Testament Foundations

A People Before a Building

The church does not begin in the New Testament. It begins with a God who has always intended to form a people for Himself. When God calls Abram in Genesis 12, He is not merely making a promise to one man. He is initiating the formation of a community through whom all the nations of the earth will be blessed. The promise of a people, a land, and a blessing that reaches beyond Israel to the whole world sets the trajectory for everything that follows.

The Hebrew word most often translated as "congregation" or "assembly" in the Old Testament is *qahal*, the gathering of God's people for worship, instruction, and covenant life. This word is translated into Greek in the Septuagint as *ekklesia*, the same word the New Testament uses for "church." The continuity is intentional. The church of the New Testament is not a replacement of Israel but its fulfillment and expansion, the ingathering of Jews and Gentiles into the one people of God through faith in Messiah Jesus.

Israel as the Pattern of the People of God

Israel's life as the covenant people of God provides the vocabulary and the patterns that the New Testament applies to the church. Israel is a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19:6), called to represent God before the nations and the nations before God. This priestly identity, the calling to stand at the intersection of the divine and the human and to make God known in the world, is one that Peter explicitly applies to the church: "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Peter 2:9).

Israel also embodies the tension that will mark the church in every generation: called to be holy, set apart from the surrounding culture, yet perpetually tempted to conform to it. The prophets spend their ministries calling Israel back to its identity as God's covenant people, warning against the assimilation of surrounding values and practices. This same tension is the central challenge of every church in every culture: to be in the world without being of it, to engage the surrounding culture without being absorbed by it.

The City and the Witness

The Old Testament closes with a vision of Jerusalem as a city to which the nations stream, drawn by the light of God's presence among His people (Isaiah 60:1-3). Zion is not merely a geographic location but a theological symbol, the place where God dwells with His people, visible and attractive to those outside. When Jesus tells His disciples that they are a "city set on a hill" that cannot be hidden (Matthew 5:14), He is drawing on this deep Old Testament current. The people of God are not meant to be invisible. Their common life is meant to be a public witness to what God is like and what a redeemed community looks like.

The Old Testament establishes that God's redemptive purpose is always communal. He calls a people, not merely a collection of individuals. The patterns of Israel as a priestly nation, a covenant community, and a visible witness among the nations all find their fulfillment in the church of Jesus Christ.

II

New Testament Understanding

Jesus and the Church

Jesus explicitly announces His intention to build the church. In Matthew 16:18, He declares: "I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." This is a statement of ownership, purpose, and ultimate victory. The church belongs to Jesus. He is its builder. And no force, whether external persecution or internal failure, will finally defeat it. The gates of hell are the powers of death and destruction. Jesus is saying that the advance of His church will overcome them, not the other way around.

Throughout His ministry, Jesus forms a community around Himself. The twelve are not merely students receiving private instruction. They are the nucleus of a new Israel, a reconstituted people of God gathered around the Messiah. His teaching on love for one another, His practice of shared meals, His instructions about forgiveness and reconciliation within the community all presuppose a life lived together, not merely a set of private beliefs held individually.

The Church in Acts

Acts 2 records the birth of the church as a gathered community empowered by the Holy Spirit. Luke's summary of the earliest church's life in Acts 2:42-47 has become the defining portrait of what the church is meant to be: "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Four activities, sustained and intentional. The Word, community, the Lord's Supper, and prayer. These are not programs but practices, the disciplines through which the common life of God's people is formed and sustained.

What follows in those same verses is equally instructive. Awe comes upon everyone. Signs and wonders occur. Generosity flows so freely that no one has need. People are added to the community daily. This is not a template to be mechanically replicated but a portrait of what happens when the people of God are genuinely gathered around the things that matter. The external effects, the growth, the witness, the wonder, are the overflow of an internal reality. They are not strategies. They are fruit.

The Body of Christ

Paul's most distinctive contribution to the theology of the church is the metaphor of the body. In 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, he describes the church as a body of which Christ is the head and each believer is a member, differently gifted, mutually dependent, and together forming something none could be individually. This metaphor does several things at once. It establishes the organic unity of the church. It insists on the necessity of every member. It diagnoses the foolishness of division and self-sufficiency. And it locates the church's life in its relationship to Christ, the head from whom the whole body grows and is nourished (Colossians 2:19).

Ephesians 4 extends this into a vision of the church's growth toward maturity: "Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" (Ephesians 4:15-16). The church grows as its members grow. It builds itself up as each part does its work. There is no passive Christianity in this vision. There are no spectators.

The One Church

Paul's letter to the Ephesians presses hard on the unity of the church. "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all" (Ephesians 4:4-6). The sevenfold repetition of "one" is deliberate and emphatic. The church is not a collection of competing communities each with their own Jesus. It is the one body of the one Lord, gathered across time and geography into a single, continuous people. Every local congregation is an expression of this one church, not a fragment of it. When the local church gathers, the whole church, in some meaningful sense, is present.

The Bride of Christ

Paul's letter to the Ephesians reveals something even more intimate about the church's relationship to Christ. In what is traditionally read as an instruction about marriage, Paul discloses that the deeper subject is Christ and the church: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish... This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (Ephesians 5:25-27, 32). The church is not only the body of Christ. She is His bride, the object of a love so total that He gave His life to secure her, so purposeful that He is actively sanctifying her, and so glorious that He intends to present her without blemish on the last day.

These two images, body and bride, carry a common logic that every believer must reckon with. You cannot divorce the body from the head. You cannot hate the body and love the head. To engage with the body of Christ is to engage, to some real degree, with Christ Himself. In the same way, you cannot hate the bride and love the groom. A person who claims to love Jesus while holding the church in contempt, who treats her as optional, who nurses bitterness toward fellow believers or positions themselves above the gathered community, has not understood who the church is in relation to her Lord. Jesus loves the church. He bled for her. He is coming back for her. How we treat her is a measure of how seriously we take Him.

The Purpose of the Church

The New Testament presents the church as existing for several interlocking purposes, none of which can be reduced to the others. The church exists for worship, the gathered adoration of God in Spirit and truth. It exists for discipleship, the formation of believers into the likeness of Christ through the Word, community, and the ordinances. It exists for community, the mutual love, care, bearing of burdens, and accountability that constitutes genuine Christian fellowship. And it exists for mission, the proclamation and embodiment of the gospel to a world that does not yet know it.

These purposes are not in competition. A church that worships well will be formed for mission. A church that is genuinely in community will make the gospel visible. A church that takes discipleship seriously will have something worth sharing with the world. The purposes of the church are a unified whole, each feeding and sustaining the others.

III

Early Church (First 300 Years)

The early church developed its understanding of its own identity under conditions of social marginality, periodic persecution, and constant theological pressure. These conditions, rather than weakening the church's ecclesiology, sharpened it. The church was compelled to think carefully about what it was, who belonged to it, and what held it together.

Ignatius of Antioch (c. 35-108 AD)

wrote extensively about the importance of the gathered local church and its connection to the universal church of Christ. His letters, written on his way to martyrdom in Rome, repeatedly urge the communities he addresses to gather together under faithful leadership, to celebrate the Eucharist in unity, and to guard against division and false teaching. For Ignatius, the local assembly is not optional. To be absent from the gathering is to be absent from something essential. He writes: "Let no one do anything of concern to the church without the bishop. Let that be considered a valid Eucharist which is celebrated by the bishop, or by one whom he appoints. Wherever the bishop appears, let the congregation be present." The emphasis on order, unity, and accountability under leadership reflects the early church's instinct that the community of faith requires visible, structured expression to function as God intends.

Justin Martyr (c. 100-165 AD)

gives us one of the earliest descriptions of Christian worship in his *First Apology*. He describes how Christians gather on Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection, to hear the Scriptures read and expounded, to pray together, to take the bread and cup, and to contribute generously to those in need. The portrait is striking in its coherence with Acts 2:42-47: the apostles' teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayers. Across a century and a different cultural context, the essential shape of the gathered church remains recognizable. Justin also describes the church as a body that crosses social boundaries, gathering slaves and free, men and women, rich and poor around the same table, which was itself a profound witness in the stratified society of the Roman world.

Irenaeus of Lyons (c. 130-202 AD)

understood the church as the guardian and bearer of the apostolic tradition. In his battle against Gnosticism, which claimed secret knowledge accessible only to a spiritual elite, Irenaeus insisted that the truth of the gospel was publicly proclaimed, publicly held, and publicly accountable. The church is not an invisible community of the secretly enlightened. It is a visible, structured, historically continuous community that traces its teaching through an unbroken line back to the apostles. This insistence on the public, visible, and accountable character of the church was a crucial development. The church is not a private spiritual club. It is a city set on a hill, with a teaching that can be examined, a community that can be observed, and a history that can be traced.

Cyprian of Carthage (c. 200-258 AD)

is remembered for his famous assertion that "he cannot have God as his Father who does not have the Church as his mother." This statement has sometimes been misread as a claim that salvation comes through church membership. Cyprian's actual point was both simpler and more demanding: the Christian life is not lived in isolation. To belong to God is to belong to His people. To refuse the fellowship, discipline, and accountability of the gathered church while claiming faith in God is a contradiction. The church is not merely the place where the saved happen to gather. It is, in some meaningful sense, the community through which God forms and sustains the life of His people in the world.

IV

The Reformers

The Protestant Reformation was, among other things, a reformation of the church's understanding of itself. The medieval Catholic Church had developed a highly institutional ecclesiology in which the church was defined primarily by its hierarchical structure, its sacramental system, and its visible unity under the papacy. The Reformers challenged each of these on scriptural grounds and proposed a different account of what the church truly is and what marks it as genuine.

Martin Luther proposed what became a foundational Protestant distinction: the difference between the visible and the invisible church. The invisible church is the true church, the company of all who genuinely believe, known fully only to God. The visible church is the outward institution, which contains both true believers and those who merely profess faith. This distinction was pastorally important: it prevented the Reformers from identifying any particular institution as automatically or exhaustively identical with the body of Christ. The true church is wherever the Spirit of God is truly at work in the hearts of His people.

But Luther and the other Reformers were equally concerned with the visible, gathered, local expression of the church. They proposed what became known as the *notae ecclesiae*, the marks of the true church. The two marks held by nearly all the Reformers were the right preaching of the Word and the right administration of the sacraments. Where the gospel is faithfully proclaimed and the ordinances are rightly practiced, there is the church, whatever its institutional form. Some traditions, particularly the Reformed churches, added a third mark: the faithful exercise of church discipline, by which the community maintains its integrity and holds its members accountable to the gospel they profess.

John Calvin's ecclesiology was particularly rich. He insisted that the church is the mother of all believers, not in Cyprian's sense of an institution that dispenses grace, but in the sense that God has chosen to work through the gathered community, its preaching, its fellowship, and its ordinances, to form and nurture the Christian life. Belonging to a local church is not optional for the Christian. It is the ordinary means by which God's grace reaches and sustains His people. Calvin writes in the *Institutes*: "There is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels."

V

Mainstream Western Christianity

The diversity of ecclesiological models in contemporary Western Christianity is remarkable. Episcopal traditions, including Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican, and Methodist churches, understand the church as organized around a hierarchy of bishops who stand in continuity with the apostles and whose oversight gives the church its structure and authority. Presbyterian traditions govern through a plurality of elders, with authority distributed across a system of local, regional, and national assemblies. Congregational traditions, including many Baptist and independent evangelical churches, locate authority primarily in the local congregation, which governs itself under Christ and Scripture with minimal external ecclesiastical accountability.

Beyond these structural differences, contemporary Western Christianity faces a set of ecclesiological challenges that cut across denominational lines. The consumer culture that shapes Western society has profoundly affected how people relate to the church. Church attendance has increasingly become a matter of personal preference and perceived benefit. People shop for churches as they shop for products, choosing based on style, programming, and emotional experience, and leaving when those preferences change. Belonging has been replaced by attending, commitment has been replaced by participation, and the covenant community has been replaced by a voluntary association.

The digital age has accelerated this with the proliferation of online church, a phenomenon that raises fundamental questions about what the church actually is. If the church is primarily a content provider and spiritual resource, then online attendance is an adequate substitute for the gathered community. But if the church is a body, a physical community of embodied people who share one another's lives, bear one another's burdens, and practice the one-another commands of Scripture in proximity and accountability, then online participation, however valuable as a supplement, cannot be the primary expression of what the church is.

At the same time, thoughtful voices across the theological spectrum have continued to call the church back to its identity. There has been renewed interest in liturgical practices, in the disciplines of the early church, in genuine community rather than merely social gathering, and in the church as a counter-cultural witness rather than a culturally accommodated service provider. Legacy Church stands within this recovery, seeking to be a community that takes the church seriously as Scripture presents it, neither inflating its institutional forms nor shrinking it to a spiritual preference.

VI

Key Scriptures on the Church

> Matthew 16:18
>
> *"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."*

> Matthew 5:14-16
>
> *"You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."*

> Acts 2:42-47
>
> *"And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common... And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."*

> Ephesians 4:4-6
>
> *"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."*

> Ephesians 4:15-16
>
> *"Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love."*

> Colossians 1:18
>
> *"And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent."*

> Hebrews 10:24-25
>
> *"And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near."*

> 1 Peter 2:9
>
> *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."*

VII

Legacy Church Position

At Legacy Church, we do not believe the church is optional for the Christian life. We believe it is the community through which God ordinarily forms, sustains, and matures His people, the body through which Christ continues to act in the world, and the most visible expression of the gospel in any given community. We take it seriously because Jesus takes it seriously. He did not die for a collection of private spiritual journeys. He died to "present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish" (Ephesians 5:27).

The Body of Christ

We believe the Church is the Body of Christ, a people called out of the world and gathered around Jesus, through whom He continues to act in history. The church is not a human organization that has adopted Jesus as its inspiration. It is His body, organically connected to Him as its head, dependent on Him for its life, and accountable to Him for its faithfulness.

A City on a Hill

The Church is a city on a hill that cannot be hidden, shining as a witness to the world (Matthew 5:14-16). The common life of the church is not a private affair. It is a public display. When the church loves well, forgives genuinely, bears burdens faithfully, and welcomes the broken with dignity, it shows the world something it cannot produce on its own. The church's witness is not primarily its words, though words matter. It is the visible life of a community being transformed by the gospel.

One Church Across All Time

There is only one Church, made up of all who belong to Jesus, regardless of location or time in history (Ephesians 4:4-6). Legacy Church is one local expression of this one universal church. We are not the whole church, and we do not act as though we are. We stand in continuity with the believers who have gone before us, in fellowship with the believers around the world who share our faith, and in anticipation of the day when the whole church will be gathered in the presence of its Lord.

Existing for Worship, Discipleship, Community, and Mission

The Church exists for worship, discipleship, community, and mission, to declare and display the gospel to the world (Acts 2:42-47). These four purposes are not programs we run. They are the shape of our life together. We gather to worship the God who saved us. We disciple one another into the likeness of Christ. We do life together in genuine community, bearing one another's burdens and holding one another accountable. And we go into the world with the gospel, because we exist not only for ourselves but for those who have not yet heard.

Under the Authority of Jesus

The Church answers to Jesus as its ultimate authority, for He is the head of the Body (Colossians 1:18). No elder, pastor, denomination, or tradition stands above Him. Our leadership serves under His lordship and is accountable to His Word. When the practices or preferences of any human authority conflict with the clear teaching of Christ, Christ wins. This is not a statement about church governance in the narrow sense. It is a statement about the nature of the church itself. It belongs to Jesus, and He leads it.

Governed by Scripture

The Church submits to the Bible for instruction on how to govern and operate, as the Scriptures provide everything needed for sound doctrine, leadership, worship, and mission (2 Timothy 3:16-17). We do not look primarily to cultural trends, organizational best practices, or the preferences of our congregation to determine how we function. We look to Scripture. This does not mean we are rigid or unthinking in how we apply biblical principles to contemporary contexts. It means that Scripture sets the boundaries and establishes the priorities within which all our contextual wisdom operates.

What This Means for How We Live Together

We believe that belonging to a local church is not optional for the Christian. It is the ordinary context in which God forms His people, the community in which the one-another commands of Scripture can actually be practiced, and the body through which the gifts of the Spirit are exercised for the common good. You cannot love your neighbor in the abstract. You need actual neighbors. The church gives you that.

We also believe that the church is worth defending, worth sacrificing for, and worth suffering for. Jesus loved the church and gave Himself for her. We are called to the same. This means we do not treat the church as a service we consume or a community we participate in when convenient. We treat it as a body we belong to, a family we are committed to, and a city on a hill we are responsible to keep shining.

Legacy Church exists to be a genuine expression of what the church is meant to be: a people gathered around Christ, formed by His Word, empowered by His Spirit, displaying His character, and sent with His gospel into a world that desperately needs to see it lived out.

· · ·

SOLI DEO GLORIA