

## Food For Prayer...Who is the Church?

The study of the church is called ecclesiology. What is our nature and purpose? The story of Christianity and the communities at its heart is deep and broad. Global diversity is not merely a recent thing—the gospel spread throughout the known world very early.<sup>1</sup> Today the church of the majority world is dynamic, diverse and influential and at the same time it has been suggested that the church in Aotearoa, like most in the traditional ‘West’, is grappling with an increasingly marginal place in society. *Q. What is the proper response to this experience? What steps could the recently marginalized take to learn from those who have long lived, suffered, and worshipped on the margins (including those whose stories have been intentionally excluded)?*

- What is its essential message?
- Its nature and identity?
- The marks of its continuity?
- Authority and structure?
- How do you work out being different from the world and at the same time *for* the life of the world?

Our view of the church is shaped by our beliefs about who God is. In this sense our theological understanding of the church’s nature and purpose is shaped by biblical, theological, historical, and contextual concerns. An emphasis that has massively influenced contemporary understanding is that of the “mission of God.” This reaffirms that God is missional—the church finds its true identity and purpose within God’s ministry and mission. Michael Jinkins argues that the most important ‘Reformed’ impulse is thus the one it shares with the whole church—its unflinching commitment to articulate the gospel of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup> Just so, the ministry of the risen and ascended Christ in the power of the Spirit (who precedes, creates, and animates the church) becomes our prime identity marker *rather than* polity. *Q. How do your own experiences and beliefs shape your view of who the church is and what it is for? **Who is Christ, and who does Christ want us to be?***

**These are key biblical concepts:** People of God (E.g. 1 Peter 2:9-10); Body of Christ (E.g. Eph 1:22-23; 1 Cor 12:27); Temple of the Spirit (E.g. Eph 2:19-22; 1 Peter 2:5); a priesthood of believers (E.g. Exodus 19:6, Is 61:6, 1 Peter 2:9). *Discuss their significance. Which of these best describe your experience of church? What is the connection with Israel?*

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (C.E. 381) confessed by virtually all Christian traditions throughout history puts our essential characteristics this way:

One;  Holy;  Catholic;  Apostolic

➤ Spend some time looking into a deeper understanding of these ‘marks.’ Then discuss what it might mean to consider them not merely as markers, but as both *gifts* and *tasks*.

Identify and discuss the many key points in these words from Rev. Professor Murray Rae:

*“There are some things that have been central to the life of the church over time and space: these include the gift of the Spirit, the preaching of the good news of Jesus in continuity with Israel’s story, baptism, the breaking of bread, prayer, fellowship, devotion to the apostles’ teaching, the sharing of a common life and worship...somewhere... [people] must hear the news addressed to them that God has come among us in the person of Christ, who has taken our suffering and our sin upon himself, has died for us, has been raised from the dead and has reconciled the world to God. **The church is the community entrusted with that news, that is called to live by it and that is commissioned to proclaim it (emphasis inserted).**”<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>See for example, Robert D. Woodbury. “Conclusion: World Christianity—Its History, Spread, and Social Influence.” In *Introducing World Christianity*, ed. by Charles E. Farhadian, 259-271. West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2012.

<sup>2</sup>These questions adapted from Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, “Ecclesiology and the Church in Christian Tradition and Western Theology,” in *The Church From Every Tribe and Tongue: Ecclesiology in the Majority World*, eds. Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, K.K. Yeo (Cambria, UK: Langham Global Library, 2018), 16.

<sup>3</sup> Murray Rae, *Christian Theology: The Basics* (Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition), Ch. 7 A New Community.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Jinkins, *The Church Transforming*, 12