

Revelation 1:20 - The purpose of the church

Revelation 1:19-20 NKJV

19 Write the things which you have seen, and the things which are, and the things which will take place after this. 20 The mystery of the seven stars which you saw in My right hand, and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches.

v 20 **The mystery**: in that culture, it meant something that was not known, but could only be understood by the initiated. We are the initiated, because we are born again. The church is a mystery, because it wasn't revealed in the Old Testament. You won't find anything about the church in the Old Testament.

v 20 **The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands which you saw are the seven churches**: Jesus kindly interprets His own images. The **stars** in His hand represent **the angels of the seven churches**. The **lampstands** represent the **seven churches** themselves.

Notice that each church had its own *angel*, and Jesus held these angels in His hand. Most, including myself, believe these angels are the pastors of these seven churches. This idea is based on a literal understanding of the ancient Greek word translated angel, *aggelos*. That word literally means "messenger," and certainly pastors are "messengers" to churches.

Why are they likened to stars? Because according to Daniel 12, those who turn many to righteousness will shine as stars forever.

It is more important to notice *where* the **angels or messengers** are: the **right hand** of Jesus. This is a place of safety and strength. Even the problem churches that will be described in the next chapters are in the **right hand** of Jesus.

Again, why seven churches. Seven is always used of the completeness or perfection of something. These seven churches are symbolic of all the churches through out history.

What is the Church? — Three Meanings

Church (ekklesion) = the called out ones. Story about old lady saying during a meeting, "these young people are desecrating the church by chewing gum." The pastor replied, "the churches are chewing the gum."

The three meanings of "church" in scripture:

1. The church is each individual Christian, not a building.

1 Corinthians 12:12-13 NLT

The human body has many parts, but the many parts make up one whole body. So it is with the body of Christ. ¹³ Some of us are Jews, some are Gentiles, some are slaves, and some are free. **But we have all been baptised (*identified with*) into one body by one Spirit**, and we all share the same Spirit.

When we believed the Holy Spirit baptised us into the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit first of all came to live in us, but second He made us a part of Christ. We are members of His body, His flesh, and His bone. Our new identity is that we individually belong to the body of Christ, the church.

2. The church is the local church.

Revelation 1:20 is primarily referring to the local churches and the pastors of their churches. Jesus is among the churches, and each church is responsible to Jesus Christ.

3. The universal church, representing all true, born again Christians.

When the rapture happens, all true believers will be snatched away by God to meet Him in the air. All true believers together make up the church of God in its entirety.

Summary of verse 20:

- Each pastor is in Jesus right hand. This is a great blessing, but also a great responsibility.
- the churches are referred to as lampstands, because we are the light of the world.

The Four Applications of the Seven Churches

The seven churches were seven literal churches, but they also represented all churches. There are 4 applications, 4 things that He wants to teach us through each of the 7 churches.

1. Each of the 7 local churches, of which John was most likely an overseer, would receive an individual and specific message that was useful at the time.
2. These churches had problems and strengths that would be useful for churches down through history. We can see what problems to look out for and what we should be like.
3. The same problems and strengths can be applied to the individual. I can look at my personal relationship with God and get much application from these. E.g. the first church, the loveless church. Yes, the people were well taught, and so we should be, but we can lose the heart of God when our affections for God dwindle or cool off.
4. An overview of church history. The order of the letters reflects the how the church had changed over the centuries. Each letter shows the chief characteristics of each era of church history. As usual the bible is incredibly accurate in its telling of the future.

The Purpose and Function of the Church

Before we start looking at the specific churches with their specific strengths and weaknesses, I would like to step back and ask two big questions regarding the church which will help us to apply what we will learn in coming weeks:

1. What is the purpose of the church?
2. How do we fulfil that purpose?

If we look at Revelation 2:1 it says about Jesus, "**who walks in the midst of the seven golden lampstands**".

Where is Jesus walking? In the midst of the church. You will meet Christians who say, "Well, I'm not into church." Well, that's too bad, because Jesus is. "Yeah, but the churches around here have so many problems," they'll say. Well, so did these. And yet Jesus was in their midst. Remember that if you do ever find a perfect church, don't go in, because then it won't be perfect any more.

The first question is, what is the primary or most important purpose of the church, of believers gathering together?

Isaiah 43:7 NKJV

Everyone who is called by My name,
Whom I have created for My glory;
I have formed him, yes, I have made him."

Answer: The ultimate purpose of the church, like everything else in creation, is to bring glory to God.

The question now becomes how does the church bring glory to God?

John 17:20-23 gives us the answer to this question.

John 17:20-23 NKJV

"I do not pray for these (12 disciples) alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; ²¹ that they all **may be one**, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also **may be one** in Us, **that the world may believe that You sent Me.** ²² And **the glory which You gave Me I have given** them, that they **may be one** just as We are one: ²³ I in them, and You in Me; that they **may be made perfect in one**, and **that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.**

Answer: We need to become one, to experience true spiritual unity.

First, what unity isn't

Jesus did not pray for uniformity, or institutional unity among believers, but a personal dynamic of unity, bringing together the Church's rich diversity through a loving acceptance of each others differences.

What is the difference between unity and uniformity?

Uniformity seeks to unite wheat and tares; it can't be done. Wheat = true believers, tares = false converts.

Unity of institutions or denominations does not ensure unity of the Spirit. We see this today in the ecumenical movement — let's break down the barriers and all be one. "Let's be one in the One," is a motto I've heard before. Uniformity is a false unity based

on compromise, fear and coercion. “Come on, how come your church isn’t joining in?” someone asks. The problem is that some of the churches involved preach a false gospel, either the prosperity gospel or a works gospel. Think about what Paul said in Galatians 2:5 when people came into the church and tried to get people to start keeping parts of the law in addition to simple faith in Jesus:

Galatians 2:5 NLT

⁵ But we refused to give in to them for a single moment. **We wanted to preserve the truth of the gospel message for you.**

*The victim of uniformity is Biblical truth and the gospel message. We must at all cost preserve the truth of the gospel message. Again, the ecumenical movement is all about compromise, about all being the same, about letting go of anything that might offend someone else in the group, regardless of if it’s true, and accepting the group norms, even if they are false. What you end up with is a watered down gospel, and christians with very weak convictions. It’s not hard to notice that the modern ecumenical movement is not just multi denominational, but multi religion. Now days, when many so-called christian leaders announce a national day of prayer, it’s for everyone — Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews and Christians. *Who are we supposed to be praying to?* I think it’s safe to say that we are well on the way to a one world ecumenical religion where everyone believes everything and nothing at the same time.*

What criteria do we use to know if we can work with another church?

The key to working with other christians is that they have the same gospel, the gospel of grace, and that they worship the same God — Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We must be in agreement on essential doctrines. Important questions to ask about the gospel are:

1. How is a person saved? (grace or works)
2. What is a person’s motivation for being saved? (gratitude or greed)

The documentary “American Gospel: Christ alone” does a great job of explaining the true gospel, while at the same time exposing and explaining the various false gospels, namely the faith plus works gospel and the prosperity gospel. It’s something that can be watched multiple times because there’s so much in it and it’s so clearly explained.

Other differences in doctrines and preferences are ok. We need to look beyond them. We need to learn to agree to disagree on minor issues, for example, differences in end time theology and preferences in music styles etc.

So what is true unity? True unity is based on love and truth. Why do we need both love and truth? Ephesians 4:15 says we are to speak the truth in love because ***love without truth is hypocrisy, while truth without love is brutality.***

An example of hypocrisy — telling someone that can’t sing who has asked to sing on the worship team that they are so great that they should quit their job and look for a job as a lead vocalist — “Well I didn’t want to offend them, I didn’t want to hurt their self-esteem.” This is love without truth — it’s nothing but lies and hypocrisy.

An example of brutality — a husband tells his wife who has spent the entire afternoon trying to make his favourite dish on their 1st wedding anniversary that her cooking sucks, that the food she makes is simply inedible, and that she needs to get cooking lessons — truth not spoken in love is a weapon that destroys relationships and causes great discouragement. *In many cases, love is the difference between a struggling person quitting or persevering.*

True unity accepts people the way they are, and celebrates the natural diversity that God has put into the church. We all have different weaknesses, strengths, personalities, talents, spiritual gifts and ministries or callings. We are all at different points in our walk with God. Yet we can all work together as we are led by the Spirit. We'll learn how this happens shortly. For now, here is a quote that illustrates what I am talking about:

Such a powerful evangelist was George Whitefield that thirty thousand people would regularly attend his open-air meetings. So anointed and eloquent was he, history records many orators and actors would come just to watch him. Charles Wesley, a contemporary of Whitefield's, was also preaching to multitudes. Yet so diverse were the views of these two men on certain doctrines, they took out advertisements in the newspapers explaining why they believed what they did—and why the other was amiss. People thought these men hated each other—until one reporter asked Whitefield, "Tell me, Mr. Whitefield, do you expect to see Charles Wesley in heaven?" "No," answered Whitefield. "He's going to be so close to the throne, and I'm going to be so far back, I'll never see him." (From Jon Courson's Application Commentary)

This is how it should be. Here, these two very fruitful men of God had very different views doctrinally, and very different flavours in ministry, but they had unity through love in their diversity.

Now we know what unity is, let's take a closer look at John 17:20-23, a part of Jesus' prayer for all believers, the church.

John 17:20-23 NKJV

"I do not pray for these (12 disciples) alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; ²¹ that they all **may be one**, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also **may be one** in Us, **that the world may believe that You sent Me.** ²² And **the glory which You gave Me I have given** them, that they **may be one** just as We are one: ²³ I in them, and You in Me; that they **may be made perfect in one**, and **that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me.**

v 21 **may be one... That the world may believe:** The stakes of the unity Jesus prayed for are high. The spiritual unity of Christians is linked to the way the church represents Jesus to the world. Jesus said in:

Jn 13:34-35 NLT

³⁴ So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other. ³⁵ Your love for one another will prove to the world that you are my disciples."

The fruit that brings glory to God is His life, His love, working in us, flowing through us.

Back to John 17:20-23

v 21 **That they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You:** The foundation of our unity is the same as the foundation of unity between the Father and the Son: equality of person. We are all on the same ground at the cross. We are all undeserving sinners saved by grace. None of us have anything to boast about. The cross creates a level playing field.

v 22 **The glory which You gave Me I have given them:** There should be a shared glory among believers, the glory of the present Christ. A focus on Jesus in our presence will promote unity. In contrast, the moment we start looking at ourselves or anything else, there will be disunity and division and dissension. *Again, only a focus on Jesus in our presence will promote unity.* Just like the only way a husband and wife will grow closer to each other is if they grow closer to the Lord, so our love for our brothers and sisters in Christ will only grow if we are growing in our love for Jesus, if we are focused on our relationship with Jesus.

What does this glory look like? Simply put, *we share His glory when we share His character.* If we have the glory that the Father gave the Son, remember that it was a glory that was often expressed by being obedient, loving, humble, meek, willing to suffer, and willing to sacrifice for others. This is the character of Jesus. *We share His glory when we share His character.*

v 23 **I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me:** This is not a unity of compromise, or of fear or coercion. Jesus wanted a unity of love, and common identity in Jesus. Again Jesus must be our focus. Not the ministry, not ourselves, not the doctrine. It's firstly all about relationship.

v 23 **I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am:** This is the consummation or final result of the unity. You might as well learn to get along with your brothers and sisters in Christ down here, because you'll be spending eternity with them afterward.

v 23 **that they may be made perfect [complete or mature] in one:** Jesus' strong desire and prayer for His followers was that they be made perfect or complete or mature in their relationship with Him. Do we share the same desires for our brothers and sisters in Christ? Is what we do for others driven by a desire to help them grow in their relationship with God, or is it something else, something worldly?

So how does the church grow in unity? Simple, we encourage each other to grow in our relationship with God.

Hebrews 10:24-25 NLT

²⁴ Let us think of ways to **motivate one another to acts of love and good works.**

²⁵ And let us not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, **but encourage one another**, especially now that the day of his return is drawing near.

Should Believers go to Church?

Let's look at why believers should be a part of a local church, what the benefits are and how we can encourage each other.

Each believer is like a coal. If we are in the fire, we glow red and together lots of coals produce heat and light that bless many people. However, if one coal decides that it doesn't need to be with the other coals, that those other coals aren't good enough or are too troublesome and burdensome, then that one isolated coal will grow cold, slowly but surely. Their love for the Lord will wane and die. The only way for this person to start glowing again, to be hot again, to fan into flame their love for God, is to be in fellowship. God made us to be a part of a local body of believers. We are each members of one body. We need each other more than we know. There is a warning in proverbs against those who would seek to isolate themselves and think that they can enjoy close fellowship with God while not being connected to a local body of believers.

Proverbs 18:1 NKJ

A man who isolates himself seeks his own desire;
He rages against all wise judgment.

Proverbs 18:1 NLT

Unfriendly people care only about themselves;
they lash out at common sense.

Here is my way of explaining why thinking you are protecting yourself by isolating yourself is actually harming yourself and is not good common sense. My definition of marriage is God putting two selfish people together for the purpose of refining them and revealing to each other and themselves just how selfish they really are. Without being in that situation where *everything* is shared, where *nothing* is your own, where *everything* you do affects the other, where I am with the other person all the time, where God commands me to put the other person first *every* time, I really thought that I was quite a nice guy, really quite unselfish and generous. Boy did my wife do a great deal of damage to my self-esteem. You see, I esteemed myself, my sinful nature, quite highly, because in the absence of marriage, most of the time, all I had to consider was myself. There I was, by myself, thinking about myself, and agreeing with myself all the time. I'd ask myself, do you want to read a book now or walk the dog. Walk the dog, yep, I thought so. I'd always be able to fit in with what I wanted to do — I was so good to myself. What a great person I was. In regard to being selfish, being single is definitely the easy road. There is very little compromise that you have to make.

You can also think of marriage as God putting two uncut, very ugly and unattractive diamonds into a bag and then shaking them up. What happens? They become smooth and polished, able to reflect the light that shines upon them. When God puts two people together in marriage, they rub each other up the wrong way, they get on each other's nerves, but all the while, their rough edges are being chipped away, as their character is being transformed to be more and more Christlike. And soon enough, the light of God's glory starts reflecting off these beautiful gems.

You might say, well, that's fine for two people who get along most of the time, but my spouse isn't even saved, he never says sorry, and he isn't changing. It's just so hard you complain (I'm not suggesting that a person should tolerate physical abuse or any other unlawful behaviour). Well, *they might not be changing, but you should be changing.*

The testimony of many Christians who have endured these difficult, unloving marriages is that, although those years were hard, they wouldn't have had it any other way. Why? Why wouldn't they do things differently if they had the chance to live their lives over again?

Because they were forced to turn to God to find the strength to keep on loving the other person. They were forced to depend on God to give them the humility and grace to forgive, again and again. Their brokenness led to beauty, their sorrow led to joy. In the end, their relationship with God was so much stronger than if they had been in an “ideal” marriage, where there were very few conflicts. Their faith had been tried and tested and as it says in James 1 and 1 Peter 1, they now rejoice with inexpressible joy.

So why talk about marriage? Well, the church is made up of brothers and sisters in Christ. We are one family, one body. We should be spending time with each other as we pray, serve, worship and help each other out. It's like God is putting a select number of uncut diamonds in a bag and calling in a church. He then starts shaking the bag and we all start rubbing against each other — it hurts and it's often uncomfortable. The result is the same as for marriage. As we learn who we really are by our selfish and sinful attitudes and reactions to others — we ask God for help. We ask God to change us, to make us more like Him, and we learn to rely on Him more and more. As a consequence, we learn to get along with others. We learn to truly love those people who we found unlovable at the start. We start to see past their flaws and quirky personalities and beliefs. We start to love them for the person that God made them to be. It's a beautiful thing.

So, just like a husband and wife usually have to learn the hard way to get along, but end up stronger because of the struggle and conflict, so do church families - if they learn to trust in and depend upon God. There will be arguments, hurt feelings and misunderstandings. Expect them, because none of us are perfect. What's important is that we take advantage of the opportunities that God gives us to learn to forgive others, learn to love others, learn to encourage others, learn to be truthful with others, learn to help others, learn to support others, learn to bear with others' weaknesses, learn to teach others, and learn to disciple others.

In summary, we need each other, as much as it is sometimes hard to be around each other. If we are patient and persevere through the hard times, we will grow together, both to love the Lord more and love and appreciate each other more and be encouraged as we watch the Lord change the people around us from the inside out to become more like Him before our very eyes. However, if we quit, if we give up, if we don't have the big picture in mind, if we are attending with the wrong motive, then we will miss the opportunity to grow in our faith, we will miss out on those beautiful friendships that we shared with the most unlikely people. *Those who quit may have an easier life in some ways, but an emptier life.*

Conclusion

I would like to remind us of why God puts us believers together in local churches, and doesn't just leave us to do our own thing. If Jesus thinks that that person in the body is worth loving, forgiving and bearing with, then so must I. I need to love those whom Christ loves, which is everybody. If I don't give up on them, I will learn patience and grow in my character, my faith and my love, and the other person will be blessed and encouraged. It's a win win situation. We need to demonstrate grace towards each other. If we don't, if we quit, if we leave, then our lives will be sadly lacking in growth and joy.

This is the main purpose of the church, to bring glory to God as people's lives are changed to become more like Jesus. That's why God puts forgiven sinners together in a local church, a small version of the body of Christ, so we get a chance to put into practice what we learn from the bible. Again, how am I going to learn to be patient if there is no annoying person around? How am I going to learn to forgive if there is no one around to hurt me? How am I going to learn to love unconditionally unless there is an ungrateful person in the church? None of this is easy, but very necessary.

Unfortunately, the world says that if you are unhappy, then leave or quit. Marriages split, churches divide, and now there is a generation of church hoppers, or shoppers, who select a church based on how well it suits them, and/or on how well they get along with others. If it doesn't suit them, or if there is a problem with someone, they just leave. There is no commitment, because they were there for the wrong reason. Their motive for going was selfish.

God wants us to seek Him, to ask for His direction as to what church family we should belong to. It's not about me and how it makes me feel, or if my friends are there, or if there is a youth group or a Sunday School or a creche, or they sing hymns or don't sing hymns. Rather, it's about where God wants me to be, so I can grow, and so I can encourage others. This person will be committed to the local church body, and will be willing to go through the tough process of reconciliation after an argument, of forgiving the person who let them down, of walking next to the brother who fell into sin, of serving even when not appreciated — because they are doing it for Christ, and not for men, not for themselves.

Ephesians 4:1-6 NLT

Therefore I, a prisoner for serving the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of your calling, for you have been called by God. ² Always be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults because of your love. ³ Make every effort to keep yourselves united in the Spirit, binding yourselves together with peace. ⁴ For there is one body and one Spirit, just as you have been called to one glorious hope for the future. ⁵ There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all, in all, and living through all.