

What Should and Could the Church Look Like?

My grandpa once asked me a question during his visit to my hometown: What should and could the church look like? At first glance, this may seem like a complex question, but I believe the answer becomes clearer when we examine the etymology of the word ‘church’ and consider its biblical significance. In Scripture, names are never given idly; they reflect identity and intention. For example, Simon’s name was changed to Peter, meaning ‘rock,’ to signify a new purpose—a transformation from instability to strength and conviction. This pattern recurs throughout God’s word, underscoring the power and meaning embedded in names. With this in mind, let us explore what Jesus intended for his body by considering the origins and implications of the word ‘church.’

An Etymological Exploration of ‘Church’ and ‘Worship’

To understand what the Christian church could and should look like, it is fruitful to examine the etymology of its central terms: church and worship. Their Greek, Hebrew, and Germanic roots illuminate ancient expectations for Christian community—expectations that challenge, refine, and reorient modern practice. By returning to these origins, we discover a vision of the church not as a building or institution, but as a gathered, called-out, and God-oriented people whose life together is marked by devotion, service, and embodied allegiance.

Church: The Called-Out People, Not the Building

The New Testament uses ‘ekklesia’ to describe the Christian community. In classical Greek, ‘ekklesia’ referred to a civic assembly of citizens summoned for public responsibility. In the New Testament, this concept is transformed: the church is not merely an audience or association, but a summoned community, called out of ordinary life into a new collective identity shaped by the lordship of Christ.

If the church today took ‘ekklesia’ seriously, it would not be defined primarily by its physical structure or Sunday meeting schedule. Instead, it would be a community of people called out of old loyalties into Christ’s way, a participatory assembly rather than a passive one, and a visible body whose existence is for the good of the world, not for itself.

The English word ‘church’ most likely derives from ‘kyriakon’— ‘belonging to the Lord.’ This shift from ‘ekklesia’ (a people) to ‘kyriakon’ (a building or belonging to the Lord) reveals how Christianity’s self-understanding changed through history. The etymology

reminds modern believers that what belongs to the Lord is not a structure, but a people shaped by the Lord's character. The church should reflect the Lord's priorities: justice, mercy, humility, hospitality, and love. Thus, a church should be recognizable as 'the Lord's' not by architectural style, but by the presence of Christlike life.

Germanic and Old English words that became 'church'—such as 'kirika' and 'cirice'—reinforce the idea of a location or consecrated place. Yet even here, the original meaning likely referred to a sacred assembly place, not merely a building. This suggests that the church should be a gathering with sacred purpose, a place of encounter, and a communal sacred space formed by the people who gather, not the stones that shelter them. The building is secondary; the gathered people with holy purpose are primary.

That being said, there is nothing wrong with attending a Sunday morning service, there is nothing wrong with listening to a sermon, there can be wonderful community inside the institutional church, I personally love the corporate worship when I go. A building only becomes an issue when we let it overstep its importance, going to an institutional church does not equal salvation, it doesn't even guarantee spiritual formation, singing a few songs does not equal all the worship we are called to, and listening to a sermon should NEVER substitute for discovering in the Word for yourself. If it is something you enjoy, enjoy it, just remember that the church is a people, it's a lifestyle, it never stops every moment you are breathing.

'Worship': Worth, Service, and Orientation Toward God

Understanding what the church should look like requires understanding its central action: worship. The most common Hebrew word for worship, 'shachah,' means to bow down, to prostrate, and to yield oneself in reverent submission. This term emphasizes embodied humility—worship is not primarily emotional or musical, but postural and relational, as humans acknowledge God's kingship by lowering themselves. If worship defines the church, then the church should be humble, surrendered, and oriented toward God rather than ego, spectacle, or performance.

The predominant New Testament word for worship, 'proskuneō,' literally means to come forward to kiss, to kneel or prostrate, and to show reverence by drawing near. This adds relational intimacy to the Hebrew concept, making worship an act of drawing near, directed love, and submission fused with affection. A church shaped by 'proskuneō' would prioritize deep relational connection with God, authentic spiritual intimacy, reverence without rigidity, and love expressed in tangible ways.

The English word 'worship' derives from Old English 'weorthscipe,' meaning worth-ship, or to ascribe or acknowledge worth (with your very being). Here, worship is not primarily posture or ritual, but valuation—recognizing God's supreme worth and responding accordingly. A worshipping church orders its life according to God's ultimate worth, resists idolatry (money, politics, image, self-promotion), and practices lives of service. If God is truly 'of highest worth,' then the church should reflect that in its priorities: caring for the

poor (the orphan, the widow, the least of these), communal life, ethical integrity, and countercultural generosity. Worship is a lifestyle, it is designed so that as we live others should be able to understand God's worth through our being, our identity should be centered on how great our God is.

What the Church Should Look Like: A Synthesis

Drawing these etymologies together creates a cohesive vision. From 'ekklesia,' the church should be a community distinct from the world because of Christ-like values, not a passive audience but an active assembly, deeply participatory and communal. From 'kyriakon,' the church should reflect God's character more than institutional identity, be recognizable by holiness, justice, compassion, and mercy, and prioritize spiritual formation over religious performance. From the Germanic roots of 'church,' it should be a meaningful gathering place, a community where sacred encounter happens, shaped by shared purpose, not merely attendance. From the roots of 'worship,' the church should be humble ('shachah'), deeply relational and reverent ('proskuneō'), and wholly oriented in life toward God's worth ('weorthscipe').

Conclusion of Etymology

Through its Greek, Hebrew, and Germanic etymologies, the church emerges as a humble, participatory, Christ-shaped community of belonging. It is a people called out, gathered together, and oriented toward God in reverent, relational, and life-reordering worship. What the church should look like, therefore, is not an institution driven by programs, status, or buildings, but a living community whose identity is rooted in its origins: called out, belonging to the Lord, gathered for sacred purpose, and formed by worship that declares God's ultimate worth.

Practicality, how we Can Live the Words

We have examined what the etymology proclaims a church to be, but I'd like to take a moment to talk about some practical ways in how being part of God's church, part of his "called out people," requires us to live. We know that the central act of church is worship (humble heart posture and living as to acknowledge God's value), but what does that look like in practice? Romans 12:1 says: "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God--this is your spiritual ^[1] act of worship." And Jesus calls us to this in John 15:12-13: "This is my commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you, no one has greater love than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." And we also know that according to our savior the greatest commandment is this: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it:

‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.” Matthew 22:37-40. To me, living as God wants the church to live is very clearly laid out in these scriptures, and is summarized and stated simply by the Golden Rule: “Treat others as you would want to be treated.” This is what we can practically apply as we live like the church of Christ. It requires giving of yourself until it hurts, and sometimes it hurts fiercely. It requires us to pick up our cross daily and die to our flesh. To live in the body of Christ means giving up our pride, our resources, our time, our bodies in order to serve others, and in turn serve Jesus.

So, what Should and Could the Church Look Like?

The church should and could look like a unified people called out to be disciples of Jesus, who are bold and active in their identity, and who live together in a community that builds one another up towards love and good deeds. The church should and could look like those disciples living in a posture of humility and worship, who are selfless cross bearers identifiable by how they serve in love and give of themselves. The church should look like Christ embodied in its members who are willing to die for the purpose they serve. The church is the salt and light of the world, a city on a hill that cannot be hidden. Maybe someday we will be that should and could. I sure pray so.

