

What does Christian church look like?

In the last evening before his death Jesus gave a new commandment to his disciples:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34–35)

By this commandment Jesus declared that he wanted his disciples to have deep brotherly fellowship with one another based on the same love and devotion that they saw in Him. We see the first realization of this fellowship at Pentecost, in 30 AD, after the sermon of Peter:

When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.” With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, “Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:37–47)

This fellowship was the work of the Holy Spirit and remains the model of church for all times. Times change but God’s will and Jesus’ commandment will never change.

What can we see from this description and other passages of the Bible about the features of the church?

Christians are brothers and sisters—brotherly love in the church

They devoted themselves to the fellowship ... All the believers were together and had everything in common ... Every day they continued to meet together ... (Acts 2:42, 44, 46)

For the first Christians accepting Jesus as the messiah was not only a theory, neither was it something merely personal between them and God but understanding God’s love awakened deep love and devotion in them for each other and for all people who had not heard the Good News yet. Their love and thankfulness towards Jesus was manifested in brotherly love, as John writes in his letter:

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. (1 John 4:11)

If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother. (1 John 4:20–21)

Love among Christians means taking care of each other’s spiritual life:

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away

from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. (Hebrews 3:12–14)

Learning from Jesus' love who gave his life for us, Christians want to give their lives for one another to help that everyone will reach the aim. They encourage, admonish, and build each other up.

A clear sign of the first Christians' love for each other was the readiness to have everything in common. Nobody prescribed it to them; they did it voluntarily as a natural consequence of love. Sharing their spiritual lives with each other resulted in sharing their material property as well.

Brotherhood instead of hierarchy—the right structure of the church

Love is the base of the right structure of the church. If there is brotherly love among Christians there is no room for any hierarchy as the aim is to love and not to rule over each other.

Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25–28)

In the first Christian church we see that there were apostles, elder brothers (elders—Greek: πρεσβύτεροι = presbyteroi) who were also called overseers (Greek: ἐπίσκοποι = episkopoi—translated sometimes as bishops) or pastors¹; we also read about evangelists, prophets, teachers etc. These are, however, no titles or ranks like in worldly organizations but gifts, tasks, and services given by God to build up the church.

It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:11–16)

Every member participates in the edification of the church according to his gifts. Some brothers are elder in faith or God entrusted them more responsibility but the aim is that everyone can grow in maturity. If everyone devotes himself there is no need of a leader who organizes everything. Such a monarchic structure (one pastor system) is far from the New Testament. The church has one head, this is Jesus and we as brothers are all members of his body. If we read about elders or leaders in the NT we always find them in plural and always in the above sense, i.e., like elder brothers in a family who help the younger and weaker ones to grow and reach maturity so that they can also bear more and more responsibility in God's kingdom.

Jesus said that using titles is a pharisaic, hypocritical behavior and contrary to brotherly relationship:

Everything they do is done for men to see: They make their phylacteries wide and the tassels on their garments long; they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to

¹ About the interchangeability of the words elders, overseers, and pastors compare Acts 20:17 (elders) with v. 28 (overseers, feeding the sheep) and Titus 1:5 (elders) with v. 7 (overseers)

have men call them “Rabbi.” But you are not to be called “Rabbi,” for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth “father,” for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called “teacher,” for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. (Matthew 23:5–11)

When Christians gather together everyone has something to share—not only one person (i.e., the pastor for the major part of the service):

What then shall we say, brothers? When you come together, everyone has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. All of these must be done for the strengthening of the church. (1 Corinthians 14:26)

In this chapter Paul encourages the Christian church in Corinth that they should respect the Holy Spirit’s work in each other and should not exalt themselves thinking that the gifts of some members are more precious than those of the others.

The base of all this is the fervent desire of everyone to devote themselves for God and each other. If this is missing then it is very convenient that one appointed person conducts almost everything and the other members just have to attend a prepared program.

Every Christian lives a holy life—sanctification in the church

... they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” Peter replied, “Repent ... Save yourselves from this corrupt generation.” (Acts 2:37–38,40)

They understood that they had to change radically and Peter confirmed it when he said that they had to repent. Repentance means to give up the old life of sin and to live as God’s holy people.

Therefore, prepare your minds for action; be self-controlled; set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed. As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: “Be holy, because I am holy.” (1 Peter 1:13–15)

As every member of the church strives for holiness the church itself is the holy assembly of God’s people:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which war against your soul. Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. (1 Peter 2:9–12)

The church by its holiness is a light in and for the world. People should be able to see the difference between the church and the world:

No one else dared join them, even though they were highly regarded by the people. Nevertheless, more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number. (Acts 5:13–14)

The first church was not attractive to those who wanted to continue their sinful lives but it was a clear invitation for those who wanted to repent. As we see through the example of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1–11), God himself guarded the holiness of the church. Jesus gave authority to the church to exclude from among themselves those who do not want to give up their sins (Matthew 18:15–18). A practical realization of this is visible also in 1 Corinthians 5:1–13. The church can only fulfill its mission in the world if it does not accept people who want to continue in their sins. It should be an assembly in which those people who want to be holy can support each other in their fights against sin not only with words but with their living examples.

All Christians are one in heart and mind—the unity of the church

The condition to become a member of the church is repentance and the decision to obey Jesus in everything. Jesus is one and those who want to follow him understand his teaching in one way (not in different ways). The Holy Spirit is also one and leads the believers to the same understanding of God's word. This is what we see also among the first Christians:

All the believers were one in heart and mind. (Acts 4:32)

... and this is what Jesus prayed for:

As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified. My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (John 17:18–23)

Being one as Jesus was one with the Father is a very deep unity which is not restricted only to some basic doctrines of the Bible (like believing in the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, justification by faith through Jesus etc.) but it refers to everything that Jesus and the apostles taught.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. (Ephesians 2:19–20)

Unity does not mean uniformity but obedience to God's leading in doctrinal as well as practical questions of life.

The fact that nowadays there are divisions and different teachings among people who call themselves Christians is a sign that the Holy Spirit cannot work among them because they oppose Him with their own human interpretations based on their wishes.

For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. (2 Timothy 4:3–4)

This can in no ways be accepted as something normal or part of natural human diversity. Paul saw a great danger in the divisions which occurred among the Corinthians even though they did not have doctrinal disunity.

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have

informed me that there are quarrels among you. (1 Corinthians 1:10–11)

As we see in Jesus' prayer (John 17:21) unity is an important part of our mission in the world because through this the world should realize that Jesus was not just a religion founder like many others before and after him but what he founded was the work of God, which cannot be imitated or reproduced by human efforts. In the world there are many organizations and religious movements which are held together by some common aims and principles. The Christian church, however, is different: the disciples of Jesus are one in everything—this is not possible by human effort only through the power of God.

Christians obey God's Word, the Bible—the apostolic teaching of the church

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching. (Acts 2:42)

As the first Christians received the right teaching from the apostles, all Christians later on also have to build on the same base (see Ephesians 2:19, quoted above). What the apostles heard from Jesus and what the Holy Spirit revealed to them was handed down by them to the first Christians. Now we have it in written form as the books of the New Testament. This was the base in that time and remains the base forever. No one can add anything to it or take away anything from it.

But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned! (Galatians 1:8–9)

Christians will never accept new teachings or traditions contrary to the New Testament.

The church is universal² in the sense that the belief of Christians has been everywhere and always the same. It is not identical with the belief of the big organizations which claim to be the original churches founded by Jesus but it has been always and everywhere the belief of the assembly of those people who have clung to the right teachings in spite of the deception in the name of Jesus.

The church is universal also in another sense:

Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." (Matthew 28:18–20)

All people are invited into God's Kingdom. In the church brotherly love and deep unity can be realized independently of country or nationality:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 3:26–28)

Conclusion

Someone who wants to take the above things seriously is very likely to face the objection: "Do not try it, there is no perfect church." Even though the latter part of the statement is true the first part is a severe deception. The first Christian Church was not perfect either but they were striving for perfection. We have to follow their example, only in this way we can be prepared when Jesus comes back to meet his bride the church:

² The Greek word for universal is καθολικός (katholikos) from which the term catholic is derived. Unfortunately, the organization which bears this name has not fulfilled with its example what the word actually means.

Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear. (Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints.) (Revelation 19:7–8)