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## Focus on the Church

What does the Bible say about the church?

What is the purpose of the church?

Susie Howe

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for the **Stop Child Witch Accusations** coalition

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## What is the purpose of the church?

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### Foreword

In this paper, we explore what the Bible has to say about the Church and what the Church's purpose is. The majority of us who are participating in this Forum are church leaders in one capacity or another, or are members of churches. We are here at the Forum to explore from a biblical perspective what our response should be to witchcraft accusations against children and adults, not only as individuals, but as representatives of the Church of Jesus Christ here on earth. We therefore need a clear understanding of what God has said about his Church in the Bible, and of his intentions and purposes for the Church.

### Origins of the word 'Church'

The word 'church' in the Bible comes from the Greek word, 'ekklesia'. 'Ek' = out of, and 'kaleo' = to call. So it means 'out-calling' in its literal sense. In every day usage, 'ekklesia' meant a company or assembly of people. It refers particularly to people called out of their homes to a public place for a special assembly. Wherever this word is used in the Bible, it refers to a community of people and not to a building. All too often, when people use the word 'church' they are thinking of a building and of 'going to church', but in the Bible the word 'church' is never used in this way. It refers to a 'community' or 'assembly'.

In the Bible, Christ first uses the word 'church' in Matthew 16:18 when he says, 'And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.' It is obvious here that he was not referring to a building but rather to a new community of people called out from the world with Christ as their head.

The word 'church' is used in three different ways in the Bible:

**First, as local assemblies or groups of believers:** (1 Corinthians 1:2, 2 Corinthians 1:1, Galatians 1: 1-2) So for example, in 2 Corinthians 1:1, the Apostle Paul addresses his letter to 'the church of God in Corinth'. The literal meaning would be, 'the assembly of God's people in Corinth.'

**Second, as the body of individual, living believers:** (1 Corinthians 15:9, Galatians 1:13) So in Galatians 1:13, the Apostle Paul writes about how intensely he had tried to destroy the church – the community of followers of Christ who were living in Jerusalem and beyond at that time.

**Thirdly, as the universal group of all people who have trusted Christ as their Lord throughout the ages:** (Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 5:31) For instance, in Ephesians 1:22–23, Paul says, ‘And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body...’ So Christ is the head of the community of faith throughout the ages, both those who have passed on to be with him and those who are still alive.

When Christ ascended to heaven, his followers regularly assembled together to ‘devote themselves to the apostles teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.’ (Acts 2:42) They became a distinctive community, called out from those around them. In Acts 2:46–47, it says, ‘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 favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.’ So this group of people continued to assemble and share their lives together, becoming a distinctive, growing community of followers of Christ. This community of people was the early Church.

## Filled with the Spirit of Christ

One of the distinctions of the early Church was that those who belonged to it were filled with the Spirit of Christ. Indeed, in 1 Corinthians 3:16, the Apostle Paul writes to the church in Corinth saying, ‘Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit lives in you?’ Again, in 1 Corinthians 6:19 Paul writes, ‘Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have received from God?’

Far from God’s Spirit being in a building, he has chosen to live in those who honour Christ as Lord.

In Acts 2, we read of how the Holy Spirit filled Christ’s followers at Pentecost, giving them not only a new boldness, passion and authority to share the good news of Christ, but also giving them the heart of Christ.

We read in Acts 2:44–45 that the believers began to sell their possessions and share what they had with those who were in need. Selfishness and self-centredness gave way to selflessness. Again, we see in Acts 4:34–35 this amazing change of heart and values in the way that the believers sold their houses in order to give to those who had need. In other parts of Acts, such as in Acts 5:12–16, we read of how the apostles were empowered by the Holy Spirit to heal the sick. The hallmarks of this new community that was filled with the Spirit of Christ were compassion, love, selflessness, generosity, a concern for those in need, a zeal to share the good news of Christ with others and authority. The Holy Spirit was transforming hearts and lives and in so doing, starting to transform communities. The culture that these believers had previously lived by was giving way to the culture of Christ’s Kingdom in the new community that they were creating.

## From all backgrounds: One Body

Another distinctive of this community of people who assembled together in the name of Christ was that they were from different nations and backgrounds — Jew and Gentile, male and female. In the context of that time, this was revolutionary. Anyone could join them, no matter what their cultural background or gender; ethnicity or former religious affinity. The uniting factor was that they were people who had turned to Christ as Lord and Saviour. The Spirit of Christ was at work in all people who turned to him, whether Jew or Gentile. The Apostle Peter comes to realise this when he witnesses the Holy Spirit being poured out on the family of Cornelius, the Roman Centurion in Acts 10. He has learned that Christ's community is not an exclusive one but rather, inclusive when he says, in Acts 10:34–35, 'I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.'

We know too that throughout the gospels and the book of Acts, women played a central role among Christ's followers and the early Church. The Apostle Paul wrote to the churches in Galatia, 'You are all sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ, for all of you who were baptised 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)

Christ's church was to be a place where there was no tribalism or prejudice. In effect, Christ was creating a new tribe of people from all nations who honoured him as the head of their lives and who consequently took on a new culture and a new identity — that of Sons and daughters of God and citizens of God's Kingdom.

In Ephesians 2:19, Paul says to the gentile Ephesians, 'Consequently you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household...'

The primary citizenship of those who are members of the church — Christ's redeemed community — is now that of citizens of God's kingdom. To explore the theology of the Kingdom of God would take weeks. But the Hebrew word for kingdom is 'malkut' and the Greek is 'basileia'. Both terms mean rule or reign. So essentially, one definition for the Kingdom of God is the sphere where God rules and reigns — the sphere where he exercises his authority and power. Tom Wright, Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at the University of St. Andrew writes,<sup>1</sup> 'The kingdom of heaven is not about people going to heaven. It is about the rule of heaven coming to earth... in other words the God of heaven is establishing his sovereign rule not just in heaven but on earth as well.' So as Christ's community, the Church, we acknowledge Christ as King, gladly bow to his rule and reign in our lives, embrace the culture of his kingdom and pray and work for his rule and reign — his kingdom — to be extended here on earth as it is in heaven.

## The Way

Instead of being known as 'The Church', the early followers of Christ were known as 'people of the Way'. The first reference to this is in Acts 9:2, where it describes Paul, or rather Saul before

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<sup>1</sup> Wright, Tom, *How God Became King: Getting to the Heart of the Gospels*, p.43, London: SPCK 2012

his famous conversion on the road to Damascus, going to the High Priest and asking him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, ‘...so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them prisoners to Jerusalem.’ In Acts 19:9, it speaks of some of the people of Ephesus publically maligning the Way. So ‘the Way’ described the people who followed Christ and their belief, before they became known as Christians. ‘The Way’ may have come from Christ’s words, ‘I am the Way, the Truth and the Life’, (John 14:6) or because his followers lived according to the Way of Christ. They lived in a way so distinctively different from that of the prevailing culture around about them, they were nicknamed ‘the people of the Way.’ That leads me to ask myself whether we as Christians today are we so outstandingly different and Christ-like, that people around us can point to us and say, ‘those people must be followers of the Way of Christ!’

## The Body of Christ

In parts of the New Testament, the Church is referred to as the body of Christ:

- Ephesians 1:22–23 says, ‘And God placed all things under his [Christ’s] feet, and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way.’

It is a thing of great wonder that Christ so identified himself with the Church that it is referred to as his body. Christ fills the Church and the Church fills the world as his representatives.

- 1 Corinthians 12 explores this imagery of the Church of Christ being like a body in greater depth. It starts by saying, ‘The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.’ (1 Corinthians 12:12)

Just as the parts of a human body are interconnected, so should the members of the Church be too.

Members of the local church or assembly of believers have different roles for the purposes of teaching and training believers, doing the work of mission and ministry and strengthening the church body. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 12:27–28, ‘Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different tongues.’

- Acts 6:1–7 and 1 Timothy 3:8–13 also give insights into the different roles and offices within local churches as outlined in the Bible.

So we have a picture of a group of people who are to live in a way that is interconnected with others. There is to be a mutual respect and honouring of each other, inter-dependency and a sharing of gifts and skills for the common good. This suggests there is no place in the church for those who isolate themselves or for those who think themselves better than others. Neither is there a place in the Church for division. More than that, this imagery suggests that the Church is to represent the presence of Christ here on earth – to be Christ incarnate. Filled with his living

presence by the Holy Spirit, the Church is literally to be his body with him at the head. The Church is to reflect Christ's ways, his values, his character and go about his business – his mission here on earth.

In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote,

“When [Christians]... speak of being “in Christ” or of Christ being, “in them”, this is not simply a way of saying they are thinking about Christ or copying him. They mean that Christ is operating through them; that the whole mass of Christians are the physical organism through which Christ acts – we are His fingers and muscles, the cells of His body.”

As those who love and follow Jesus Christ, we are members of his body. We are his hands and feet and his voice here on earth. This is the day of opportunity for the Body of Christ to impact the world as never before, as we bring hope in the face of despair, life in the face of death, and demonstrate Christ incarnate to people who desperately need to experience His touch and truth in their lives. If we are silent, the voice of Jesus is silent. If we as members of his body are inactive, people do not see God in action and at work here on earth. If we do not act righteously, lovingly, mercifully, kindly, justly, graciously and according to his ways, we discredit Christ himself. I will return to this later.

Although the church is not a physical building, believers are referred to in Ephesians 2:21–22 as members of God's household the building or temple of God, of which Christ is the chief cornerstone. ‘In him, the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.’

- 1 Peter 2:4–5 also describes the members of Christ's church being like living stones of a spiritual ‘house’.

Here we see a picture of a body of people in which God is at work and which honours him.

## The Church in Redemption History

In 1 Peter 2:9, the Apostle Peter writes of Christ's followers, ‘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.’ This mirrors the passage in Exodus 19:5–6 in which God speaks to the Israelites through Moses, ‘Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the peoples on earth; for all the earth belongs to me. And you will be my kingdom of priests, my holy nation.’

In the context of a world that had rebelled and sinned against him, God chose and called the Israelites that he had saved and redeemed at the Exodus, to be a people who would be devoted and covenanted to him; who would belong to him; who would live according to his will and with whom God would presence himself. God promised that not only would he bless the nation of Israel if they remained faithful to him, but that all the nations of the world would be blessed through them – and in particular through Abraham and his descendants (Genesis 12:1–3).

In his book, 'The Mission of God's People – A Biblical Theology of the Church's Mission,' Christopher Wright writes, '...the people who know themselves to be the redeemed people of God, now revealed as YHWH, are called upon to model before the nations what it means to be redeemed and to live redemptively in their own society.'

In the New Testament, we see the new Church of Christ – filled with his presence by his Spirit and saved and redeemed by his death on the cross taking on the mantle as God's chosen people, called to be his priestly representatives; to be distinctive and holy and to live redemptively in their own societies. God's saving hand in human history in response to human sin and rebellion starts at the Exodus, continues through to Jesus Christ and his saving death and resurrection and will be completed when he comes again to judge the world and to inaugurate a new heaven and a new earth. (Revelation 21:1-7)

Christ commissioned his Church to go and be a blessing to the nations and to fulfil his mission, just as the Israelites were commissioned through Abraham to go and bless the nations as they carried the promises and presence of God. In Matthew 28:18-20 we read, '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 to the very end of the age."'

Christ's people were to carry his presence and truth to the nations; to share the good news of reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ; to make new disciples and to demonstrate what it was like to live in a restored relationship with him and according to his original blueprint and pattern for life and living.

In the context of a society riddled with witchcraft accusations, suspicion, fear and abuse, we are here in this Forum to consider how we in this room are to carry the truth, righteousness, mercy, grace, kindness and love of Christ to our communities in Togo and to be a blessing to them. We too are called to live counter-culturally – according to the pattern and culture of our King, Jesus Christ. This after all is our calling and part of our purpose as his Church.

So let's now look in greater depth at the purpose of the Church and what its characteristics are to be, as described and revealed in the Bible:

## The Purpose of the Church

### 1. to glorify God

One of the primary purposes of the Church is to glorify God through Jesus Christ. We do this in different ways:

#### 1a. We glorify God through our love and worship of him

Worship is, 'to honour with extravagant love and extreme submission.' (Webster's Dictionary, 1828). Worship is not about singing. Rather, it is a matter of the heart. It's about the place and priority that God has in our hearts and lives and the way that we lavishly and extravagantly love and honour him through a lifestyle of holiness. When we love him with all our heart, soul, mind

and strength and seek him first and his kingdom, then we are worshipping God. When we give him our hearts and express our overflowing love and adoration to him in song, then that is worship. Without the heart, then our singing is a mere performance. One of the saddest verses in the Bible is that in Isaiah 29:13, 'The Lord says: 'These people come near to me with their mouth and honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship of me is made up only of rules taught by men.'

In John 4:23, Christ says to the woman at the well, 'Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks.' True worship involves every part of our being – mind, body and spirit and every part of our lives. It involves a total consecration to God. Romans 12:1–2 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 act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.'

Worship involves devoting ourselves to God and to the service of him; it involves having our hearts and minds and worldviews renewed so that we no longer conform to the distorted, broken patterns and cultures of this world, but rather to the pattern and culture of God and his Kingdom. During this workshop we will hear a lot about the ways that some people think and act in parts of Togo, because of their local culture and worldview, which leads to the harm of children and adults. But in these verses we learn that as God's Church – as his community – we are to renew our hearts and minds so that we no longer conform to patterns of local culture and thinking that are not in line with God's ways. Instead, we are to have our hearts, minds and practices renewed. This devoting of every part of our beings to God and aligning our hearts and minds to him, his word and the pattern of his kingdom is true worship through which we glorify God.

### **1b. We glorify God through the way that we reflect in our lives the character and characteristics of Christ**

This carries on from being transformed by the renewing of our hearts and minds and no longer conforming to the pattern of this world. The Bible exhorts us to have the heart and mind of Christ and to live like him:

- 1 John 2:6 'Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did.'
- Romans 8:29 – 'God predestined us to be conformed to the likeness of His son'
- 2 Corinthians 3:18 – 'We... are being transformed into His likeness'
- Ephesians 5:1–2 – 'Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.'

If as his people – his Church – we are to be imitators of Christ and to reflect his character and characteristics, we need to look at what some of Christ's characteristics are as revealed in the Bible.



## Some of Jesus Christ's characteristics

The Bible describes so many of Christ's characteristics that it would be impossible to list them all here. But these are some of them. He was: full of grace, kind, good, gentle, forgiving, holy, submissive, full of truth, authoritative, obedient, focussed, uncompromising with sin, motivated by his father's will rather than the will of the people, compassionate, merciful, servant-like, prayerful, not legalistic, sociable, full of life, full of wisdom, loved the unlovely and the sinner and intimate with God. Can we say that we as his followers reflect these characteristics? As we consider witchcraft accusations against children and adults, our responses must always imitate those of Christ and be Christ-like.

Let's look at a few of these characteristics – particularly in the light of how we as the Church and individuals should respond to the issue of witchcraft accusations:

**Compassionate:** (Mark 8:1–3; Matthew 9:36; John 11:33–35; Matthew 14:14, Matthew 20:29–34, Mark 6:34; Matthew 8:3) Christ had compassion on the outcast, the stigmatised, the reviled and the lost. He had compassion on those around him when he saw their vulnerability and frailty. He put himself in their shoes. He wept over their pain and brokenness. His compassion moved him to seek justice for them; to act kindly and mercifully towards them. Who are the stigmatised, the reviled and the lost in our societies? In the context of this Forum, who are the ones being outcast because they are accused of witchcraft? How are we to act towards them? The scriptures make it clear. We as Christ's Church are to reflect the compassion and love of Christ. 'Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ, God forgave you.' (Ephesians 4:32)

'Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.' (Colossians 3:12)

**Gentleness:** (Isaiah 42:2–3) Describing Christ, these verses highlight that he did not crush but rather defended the weak. Who are the weak and vulnerable in our societies that we should be defending? Although Christ responds angrily towards the temple money-changers who acted corruptly, as described in Matthew 21:12–13 and at times towards the hypocrisy of the religious leaders and Pharisees, there is no example in the Bible of Christ acting aggressively towards those who are weak, fallen, vulnerable or sinful. Can this be said of us?

**Forgiving:** (Luke 23:34; Matthew 18:21–22) Christ asked God to forgive those who crucified him and his disciples who abandoned him. Christ himself said to Peter that he was to forgive those that offended him seventy times seven – in other words, there is to be no limit to grace and forgiveness. Colossians 3:13 says, 'Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you.' At times, unforgiveness leads us to make accusations that are false because of our desire for vengeance. There is no place for that in the Church. A Christ-like Church forgives without limit and leaves judgement to God.

**Holy:** The Hebrew word for holy is 'qadosh' and means different or distinctive. It suggests being set apart for a distinct purpose. I Peter 1:15–16 says, '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.' God is set apart. He is like no other. The Church is to be set apart from everything that is not of God, or for God. We are not to be caught up in the things in our world and culture that are against his ways and laws and character.

That does not mean being legalistic and becoming ‘super-religious,’ or considering ourselves better than others. It is by grace that we have been saved. Only Christ can sanctify us. Only Christ makes what is wrong in us right. Only he can purify us. But we can choose to come under the authority of Christ and align our minds and hearts with his. We can choose to let go of the things in our cultures that are not of Christ. In the context of witchcraft accusations against children, we need to consider whether our responses are truly Christ-like or whether they are in fact unholy.

**Submissive and servant-like:** Possibly the best verses that describe Christ’s humility are to be found in Philippians 2: 3–8. He ‘made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.’ (verse 7) Does that describe you? Does that describe me? As leaders, we so often strive for status and recognition. We want to be popular and to have the biggest churches. Sometimes that desire for status and power leads us to follow the will of the people rather than the will of God. We will follow earthly culture rather than kingdom culture, because that’s what makes us popular and liked by the people. That’s what fills up our churches. There are those who at times display their power and authority using force and aggression, or by shouting and screaming or even going so far as to harm and hurt because that pleases the people. But it doesn’t please God. In John 13: 3–5, we see Christ demonstrating to us how we should live as humble servants to all: ‘Jesus knew that the Father has put all things under his power and that he had come from God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples’ feet...’ A Christ-like Church does not seek power, dominance, status and popularity or follow the will of people. It becomes a servant of all and follows the will of God.

**Merciful and full of grace:** Two hallmarks of Christ were his mercy and grace. Therefore, these should be two of the hallmarks of his Church. He went out of his way to be with those who were considered to be ‘sinners’ – those of ill-repute. Instead of condemning them, he wined and dined with them and won them over with his love and truth. Many of his followers were those who had a ‘colourful’ past or who were considered sinners or outcasts in their society, such as Matthew the tax collector (Matthew 9:9–13.) The Pharisees condemned such people but Jesus said, “Go and learn what this means: ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice...’” Christ did not judge. He did not accuse. He did not condemn. Neither must we as his followers. Whether in the case of the woman at the well, (John 4:7–30,) or that of Zacchaeus, (Luke 19:1–9) or many other examples in the Bible, Christ exercised mercy and grace. So must we. James, one of Jesus’ brothers, wrote, ‘Speak and act as those who are going to be judged by the law that gives freedom, because judgement without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgement!’ Verses like this should make us tremble and certainly influence our words and actions next time we feel tempted to judge, accuse or condemn another person, whether that person be a child or an adult.

**Loving:** Perhaps the greatest hallmark of Christ was his love – for God his father, for his disciples and his followers, for ‘sinners.’ For children, for the outcast, the lame, the sick and the ones that society had no time for – the ones that society marginalised. These are the ones that Christ loved – those that society condemned and accused. And we as his Church must love them too. Who is being condemned in our communities? Who is being accused? Who is being outcast? These are the ones that we must love. Not in a sentimental way. But with a love that is genuine and sacrificial. 1 John 3:16 says, ‘This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.’

Verse 18 says: 'Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.'

**Just:** Throughout the Bible there are literally thousands of exhortations to God's people to act justly. Because God's character is just, he abhors injustice. We only have to read the following verses from the Old and New Testament to see how God commands that we as his people live justly: (Proverbs 31:8–9; Isaiah 1:17; Isaiah 58:6; Amos 5:23–24; Micah 6:8; Zechariah 7:9–10; James 1:27)

Throughout his ministry on earth, Christ challenged the injustice of his day. In Luke 11:42, he challenges the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, 'Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.' Christ set an example that his followers continued in the early Church when they ensured that the poor, the widows and orphans were cared for. It is worth noting that when it comes to witchcraft accusations, those who are accused are often the most vulnerable in society – the elderly, the disabled, those who are orphans. Yet these are the very ones that God exhorts his Church to protect and care for. These are the very ones that God tells us to advocate for. Wherever there is injustice in our communities, we as the Church have a biblical mandate to challenge that injustice and to demonstrate what it is to act justly and with kindness and mercy.

We have explored a few of the characteristics of Christ that we as his Church are to imitate.

In the context of accusations of witchcraft against children and adults it is important to note that in the gospels, there is not one reference or example of Christ accusing a person – whether child or adult – of being a witch. Neither is there any exhortation to the Church in the gospels or epistles to accuse anyone of witchcraft. Christ never took on the role of a diviner. Therefore, as imitators of Christ and as his Church, we should not be involved in these accusations or subsequent 'deliverance rites.'

Let us now return to exploring the purpose of the Church. We have reflected at length on how the Church is to glorify God. The church also exists to carry out God's mission:

## **2. to carry out God's mission**

As we have already seen, the Church is commissioned by Christ to be a blessing and light to the nations – to announce and spread the good news of his gospel, to bear witness to Christ and his kingdom and to draw people to God and to make disciples, (Matthew 28:19–20; Matthew 5:13–16)

The Church is to bear witness to and promote the life of Christ and to be used by him to bring reconciliation, restoration and renewal: 'Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.' (2 Corinthians 5:17–18.) As we do this, we fulfil our function as the royal priesthood described by the Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 2:9.

We are to, 'Shine like stars in the universe as we hold out the word of life.' (Philippians 2:15–16). The Church is to be an agent of truth, life, hope and the healing of Christ instead of the lies, accusations, death, despair, pain and brokenness that are associated with beliefs and practices that harm, marginalise, isolate and even kill people.

### **3. to live according to the culture of King Jesus**

As members of his body and as his adopted sons and daughters, we as his Church are Christ's ambassadors — his representatives here on earth: 'We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.' (2 Corinthians 5:20).

As Christ's ambassadors, our role is to demonstrate to others what our King is like and his Kingdom. As his people, we are to live by the culture of his Kingdom — not by local culture (John 17:16). We are, in a sense, to represent God to the world.

Filled with the love and Spirit of Christ, the Church is to live counter-culturally and to show to the world what it is like to live rightly and justly according to God's ways and under his sovereign rule and reign. To show what it is like to redeem our earthly cultures that have been distorted by sin. And to demonstrate and help to establish the life-giving ways of God in our marriages, businesses, institutions, governments, schools, social and economic systems, cities, towns, villages, families. As we do this, we hold out the promise of the Kingdom of God both now and for the future. We act as a prophetic influence as we give a foretaste of what it will be like when Christ comes again and establishes a new heaven and a new earth. We share how life is meant to be lived — what relationships with each other, with God and with the world around us were designed to be like before the world and its relationships were distorted by sin. We demonstrate what lives look like that have been redeemed and reconciled to God through Christ. And we point to the way that it will be when Christ comes again and establishes a new heaven and a new earth (Revelation 21:1-7).

The gospels and epistles are packed with examples of the teaching of King Jesus and his apostles in relation to how to live life counter-culturally under his rule and reign. There are far too many to highlight here. The essential thing for Christ's church is summed up in Colossians 2:6-8: 'So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up by him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught and overflowing with thankfulness. See to it that no-one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.'

If anything in our culture or traditions is unbiblical or un-Christ-like, then we are to let those things go and to live instead according to the culture of King Jesus as revealed in the Bible. In order to be familiar with the ways of Christ, we need to diligently read our Bibles (2 Timothy 3:14-17), to be filled with the Holy Spirit who will guide us into all truth (John 16:13) and to remain faithful, loyal and in an actively close relationship with Christ as we enthrone him in our lives.

### **4. to exercise the authority of Christ**

The Bible makes it clear that the Church was called and commissioned by Christ to walk out in his authority to fulfil his mission here on earth. In John 14:12-13, Jesus says that because he is going back to the Father, anyone who has faith in him will do what he has been doing and even greater things. He states that, in order to glorify God, he will do whatever we ask in his name. In v 17, and v 26, he indicates that his people will have the power to carry out his authority because he will ask his Father to give them the Counsellor — the Spirit of truth, the Holy Spirit.

There is a difference between authority and power. Authority is the capacity we have due to the position we have been given. In Matthew 28:18–20, Christ says to his disciples, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you to the very end of the age.’

Christ has highest authority (Philippians 2:9–11, Ephesians 1:17–21; Colossians 1:15–18). Because he has commissioned us as his people, we are to go as his ambassadors in his authority to fulfil his mission, just as ambassadors of nations serve in the authority of their Head of State. Christ is our ‘Head of State’ and invests his authority in us. In Matthew 10:1, Christ gives his disciples authority over evil spirits and to heal every disease.

Ephesians 2:6–7 says that, ‘God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace; expressed in kindness to us in Christ Jesus.’

Christ not only invests his authority in us, but he also empowers us by his living Holy Spirit. We see this in the transformation of the disciples from weak, fearful men who abandoned Christ when he was arrested, into those who boldly stand before the authorities and the people to testify to his resurrection and truth, once they have been filled by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–41). They are given authority to heal people in the name of Christ and even to raise the dead (Acts 3:6, Acts 5:12–16, Acts 9:32–34, 36–41, Acts 20:9–10).

In Ephesians 1:18–21 it says, ‘I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come.’

Christ’s authority is to be handled with grace and humility. We are not to abuse that authority or to misuse it, but rather to be like our Lord and King, ‘Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant...’ (Philippians 2:6–7)

Some Christians do not have full trust and confidence in Christ’s authority or any understanding of their own authority in him. So they dabble with other beliefs and philosophies and indulge in practices that are unbiblical. They have idols in their homes, amulets and fetishes. They carry on with ancestral spirit worship and other forms of religion. This leads to a Church that is compromised, inauthentic and ineffective. It creates a Church and individuals with distorted theology who are bound up in fear; practicing false doctrine; powerless in their spiritual walk with Christ and ineffective in their witness to him.

In our response to witchcraft accusations, we as the Church are to be truly biblical and authentically Christ-like. We are not to be governed by fear but rather by God’s word and Christ himself through the Holy Spirit. We are to use our authority to bring truth and the love and healing of Christ. We are not to be swayed by false philosophies but rather by Christ.

1 Timothy 3: 15 says that as the household of God, the Church is the pillar and foundation of the truth. There is no place for false philosophies or deceptions in the Church.

Colossians 2:8–10 says, ‘See to it that no-one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ. For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form, and you have been given fullness in Christ who is the head over every power and authority.’ (See also 2 Timothy 4:3–4.)

## Finally

We have been exploring what the Bible has to say about the Church and God’s purpose for it. We have learned that the Church is to be a distinctive group of people who love God extravagantly and honour him with every part of their lives; a people who are no longer primarily influenced by conforming to local culture and beliefs – particularly where they bring harm and contradict God’s law of love and Christ’s example. Rather, we have learned that the Church is to reflect the character of Christ and his Kingdom – to not only share the good news of the gospel of Christ in words but also in loving, servant-hearted action. By doing so, we are to bring transformation, wholeness and kingdom restoration to local and global societies.

As we discuss and learn more about the reality of witchcraft accusations against adults and children in our communities in this Forum, we need to consider whether the beliefs and worldviews that underpin these accusations and consequent practices are biblical or not. If they are not, we must no longer conform to them but rather be transformed by the renewing of our minds and understanding, as it says in Romans 12:2. As we reflect on our own beliefs and practices in relation to this phenomenon, we must ask ourselves whether, having studied the scriptures, our actions and practices and ways of thinking are truly Christ-like, bringing glory to him. Or are we discrediting his name and discrediting his church? Let us be asking ourselves these important questions throughout this Forum. Let us allow ourselves to be renewed in our hearts, minds and thinking so that, as we leave this place, we are true, faithful representatives of Christ and able to be used by him to transform our communities into places where ALL children can be loved, safe, nurtured and free to be all that God created them to be.

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**Susie Howe**, November 2016

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