

What We Believe, and Why it Matters

Part 8: The Church and Communion

COTN Articles of Faith 11 & 13

1. Definition of the Church

- *Colossians 1:18; 1 Corinthians 14:40; 1 Corinthians 11, 12;
Romans 12*

2. Communion of the Church

- *Hebrews 10:24-25; Matthew 6:9-13, 26:27-29; Luke 22:19*

3. Mission of the Church

- *Matthew 22:36-40, 28:18-20; Acts 1:8*

love.learn.live.

westvalleychurch.com



West Valley Church
Michael O'Neill
11/4/18

What We Believe, and Why it Matters¹
Part Eight: The Church and Communion²
COTN Articles of Faith 11 & 13

Mavis Williams has written a poem entitled, "The Perfect Church" –

"If you should find the perfect church
Without one fault or smear,
For goodness sake!
Don't join that church;
You'd spoil the atmosphere.

If you should find the perfect church
Where all anxieties cease
Then pass it by, lest joining it
You'd mar the masterpiece.

If you should find the perfect church
Then don't you ever dare,
To tread upon such holy ground;
You'd be a misfit there.

But since no perfect church exists -
Made of imperfect (women and) men,
Then let's cease looking for that church
And love the church we're in.

Of course, it's not a perfect church,
That's simple to discern
But you and I and all of us
Could cause the tide to turn.

¹ Resources: Frank Moore, *Coffee Shop Theology* (Beacon Hill Press, 1998); Frank Moore, *More Coffee Shop Theology* (Beacon Hill Press, 1998); Al Truesdale, Ed., *Global Wesleyan Dictionary of Theology* (Beacon Hill Press, 2013); Gay Leonard, *Articles of Faith: What Nazarenes Believe and Why* (Beacon Hill Press, 1995); *Manual: Church of the Nazarene, 2017-2021* (Nazarene Publishing House, Kansas City, MO, 2017); Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Abingdon Press, Nashville, TN, 1994); Keith Schwanz & Joseph Coleson, *Missio Dei: A Wesleyan Understanding* (Beacon Hill Press, 2011); James Emery White, *Rethinking the Church: a challenge to creative redesign in an age of transition* (Baker Books, 2003); Morris Pelzel, *Ecclesiology: The Church as Communion and Mission* (Loyola Press, 2002)

² See notes at the end of the manuscript for Church of the Nazarene articles of faith 11 & 13

What fools we are to flee our post
In that unfruitful search
To find at last where problems loom
God proudly builds His church.

So let's keep working in our church
Until the resurrection.
And then we each will join that church
Without an imperfection."

I think she makes a strong point – there is no perfect church – not this side of heaven. And she makes a wise plea: love the church we are in, and keep making it better. That's why we all need Jesus. That's why we must always seek the Holy Spirit with everything we've got, to fill us and sanctify us and make us more like Christ – like we talked about last week – so that collectively, we as a church work in more and more Christ-like ways.

Today we are continuing our series called, "What We Believe and Why it Matters," exploring our Articles of Faith as the Church of the Nazarene here at West Valley Church. Has this series been helpful to you? I hope so! There are important truths about the Christian faith that we all need to be sure that we *understand*, and also that we *experience* if we are going to live life-to-the-fullest that God has for us in Christ, and if we are going to carry out our purpose in this world. If you haven't been with us, I would really encourage you to go to our website and listening to the previous sermons in this series or read the manuscripts because all of these are intended to help you have a *smart* faith – to understand what you believe if you are in fact a Christian, and to know why what you believe matters so much – to experience the difference that it makes.

And today we are looking at our statement of faith about the church. This is what our official statement says:

"We believe in the Church, the community that confesses Jesus Christ as Lord, the covenant people of God made new in Christ, the Body of Christ called together by the Holy Spirit through the Word.

God calls the Church to express its life in the unity and fellowship of the Spirit; in worship through the preaching of the Word, observance of the sacraments, and ministry in His name; by obedience to Christ, holy living, and mutual accountability.

The mission of the Church in the world is to share in the redemptive and reconciling ministry of Christ in the power of the Spirit. The Church fulfills its mission by making disciples through evangelism, education, showing compassion, working for justice, and bearing witness to the kingdom of God.

The Church is a historical reality that organizes itself in culturally conditioned forms, exists both as local congregations and as a universal body, and also sets apart persons called of God for specific ministries. God calls the Church to live

under His rule in anticipation of the consummation at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (Church of the Nazarene)

That is what we believe about the Church. By the way, you can read all of our Articles of Faith by downloading the document on the sermons page of our website, or you can join us for the next 101 class.

But I'd like to unpack that statement of belief about the church for us. That statement is kind of organized into three distinct parts, and the first is a...

1. ***Definition*** of the Church

Let's start by getting a clear definition of what the Church is, and what it is not.

I recently had a conversation over coffee with a friend of mine who is a young attorney in town, whom I respect very much. He would say he is agnostic. The conversation turned at one point to the church (generally speaking). The church itself, in our culture, is viewed in many ways – rarely in a positive way these days, I'm afraid.

Some people think the church is filled with hateful, racist, homophobic, alt-right uber-conservatives. You think I'm exaggerating, but I'm not. Are there churches like that? I'm afraid there are a few. But are we like that? Absolutely not!

Other people lump the church in with the scandals of the Catholic Church's abuse of children. They feel the church is an organization that covers up abuse and preserves power. Are there churches like that? I'm afraid there are some. But are we like that? Absolutely not!

Those are the extreme views, to be sure, but that seems to be how some in the public often characterize the church.

So because of those characterizations and others reasons, among younger generations, there is a distrust of *any* organizations. I understand that – when a church becomes an organization, then the primary objective is to protect and preserve the organization. That also means that power must be consolidated and guarded at the top, and exerted downward on those within the organization in order to maintain control. Have you been around churches like that? If a church functions like that, then I don't care what the name is on the door, they are a step away from being a cult. Are there churches like that? I'm afraid there are. But are we like that? Absolutely not!

You see...

The church is an *organism*; not an *organization*!

We are a living body with Christ as the head. The Bible very makes this very, very clear:

“Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So he is first in everything.” (Colossians 1:18, nlt)

So because we are a body and Christ is the head, it is not up to us as leaders to consolidate power, or to control you. We are *all* here to serve each other according to our gifts and ministries, in order that collectively we can best move and work in the way that Christ the head wants us to.

So I understand people's mistrust of organizations. And even though we are an organism, the truth of the matter is that, whenever you get a group of people together, eventually you are going to have to organize yourselves! If we are going to be unified in accomplishing what Christ tells us to here at West Valley Church, we have to organize ourselves; not for *control*, but for efficiency, unity, clarity, and health. Right? The Bible refers to our worship gatherings and says:

"Everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way."
(1 Corinthians 14:40, niv)

So what does all that mean when it comes to defining the church? Let's start with the word itself from that passage we just read: the word "church" comes from the Greek word, "ecclesia." It means an "assembly," a "gathering," a "community," or a "congregation."³

Don't miss something very important: the church is not a building or a location; the church is a community of believers in Jesus. *The building is merely the place where the church meets.* Remember what we talked about last week? The Holy Spirit fills believers and makes them holy, or Christ-like. The Holy Spirit does not make a building Christ-like. Listen carefully (I've said this before!): this is not a sacred place. This building is not sacred, the furniture or the equipment or the altars or even the cross on the wall are not sacred. They will not last forever. Only you and I will last forever. So this is not a sacred place. But: this IS a place where sacred things happen, as Christ is praised and present, and the Holy Spirit moves among us and in us and moves us to obey Christ. So it is important to take good care of this place, and by the way, we have plans soon to update this space in order for it to better facilitate our gatherings, so *more* sacred things can happen in this space. We've done about all we can to get a forty-plus year old sanctuary to function in 2018; we are going to have work to do in order to move into the future. *But the building is not the church, the people are!*

And we are organized in unity with the Head who is Christ, in order to better serve one another and carry out Christ's work in this world. That's exactly what the Bible talks about in many places, especially 1 Corinthians 11 and 12 and Romans 12, among others: that you and I are different parts of the One body.

In order for the body to be healthy, the organs and cells of the body need to be healthy, and to serve the body in healthy ways. So the Holy Spirit makes us holy, and teaches us to love and serve each other.

For example, your lungs do not exist for their own sake; they exist to move oxygen into your body and remove carbon dioxide from your body. Your lungs give the oxygen to your blood so oxygen can be taken to your heart and your heart can

³ Logos Bible, Faithlife, "ecclesia word study."

pump it through the body into every cell so they can all function. So the lungs exist for the body, not for their own sake. For the body to be healthy, the lungs must be healthy, along with every other organ and cell. Right? So the Holy Spirit fills you so you can be healthy in order to serve the body – this congregation – so together we can be healthy and we can carry out Christ’s work in the world – in West Valley and beyond, even all the way to Guyana, South America.

So we gather and are organized in ways that facilitate *your* ability as an individual to be spiritually healthy and *our* ability as a church to be in healthy, biblical relationship with one another. That way, together we can carry out Christ’s work in the world.

So we are not an organization; we are an organism. We are not a corporation, we are a congregation; we are a community, or the...

2. Communion of the Church

In order to be a community, we must be in communion with each other. Communion simply means a common union.

Can I just say something here about that: if we are going to be in communion, it means we *must* meet together collectively on a regular basis. From the very beginning of the early Christian church, the believers met all together on Sunday – the first day of the Jewish week, because that was the day Christ rose from the dead. So the entire ecclesia or community would gather together for worship on Sundays, and then in small groups in their homes during the week.

And yet, today, we see church attendance among Christians on the decline. Standard polling companies like Gallup have done research surveys that say that 40% of Americans identify themselves as church attenders, which is a number that has remained constant through the years. But how people identify themselves and *what they actually do* are two different things. When actual behavior is studied, we see that attendance is declining. If you were to take a photo of church attendance on any given Sunday across the US, you would find that only around 20% of us are in a church service. In fact, while it used to be that people attended church on average 3-4 times a month, now the average number of Sundays that people in the US attend church is a little over twice a month. That’s across the board in all churches.

Let me make it more specific to us: you know that we use our connection books in order to better take care of our church family; we are large enough that if one of us is going through something – maybe an illness or a crisis, and they can’t attend worship, we might not notice it until it’s too late. This is true especially if someone is not in a small group; small groups are the way we best love each other, learn together, and live out our Christian life. If someone is going through something difficult, *the first line of love is the small group* who can support, pray, provide food or resources, or whatever is needed, and the small group leaders let us pastors know what is going on so we can pray and perhaps provide greater resources than

the small group can. Right? I love the small group that Shelly and I attend. But if you are not in a group, we might not know you aren't attending until it's been awhile. So we use the connection books to better care for each other. But here's something interesting we've discovered now that we've been using the connection books together for awhile: our average attendance here on any normal Sunday is between 350-400. But, if you include people who attend worship *three* Sundays a month, our average attendance is around 450. And then, if you include people who attend on average just *twice* a month, our attendance is over 500, and if you include people who attend *once* a month or less, our church is over 650 people. There are more than 650 people who call our church their home; they just don't attend every Sunday.

Folks, God calls us to gather together for worship *weekly*: a day of celebration of Christ's resurrection, a day of consecration of ourselves to the Holy Spirit for the week ahead, a day to pray and worship and give tithes and offerings to God, a day to come together and affirm God's Word. But so often, we see the church as something we *might* fit in if we don't have kids' sports or we aren't off playing in the hills somewhere or we aren't working. And yet I'm telling you that it is nearly impossible to prioritize your Christian faith and to grow into Christlikeness if you are not showing up faithfully with your Christian family to worship together each week. Look, I know things come up. I know that maybe you can't ask for Sundays off from work. I understand that you don't control your kids' basketball or baseball schedules. We're not legalistic about this. I'm just saying that if you are truly seeking Christ and to be filled with the Holy Spirit, then you will prioritize gathering with other believers to worship Christ, to seek him through the Spirit, and to listen to his Word. That's why the Bible says:

“And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”
(Hebrews 10:24-25, esv)

You can't take a coal out of the fire and expect it to stay hot for very long! Spirit-seeking and Spirit-filled believers *must* gather together to worship and grow.

Now, there are regular things we do together: we sing, we pray, we give, we declare and respond to God's Word. There are also two sacraments or sacred activities that the Scripture tells us to do: one of those you do *once* in your life and the other we do on a regular basis. The first is baptism, and man we know how to celebrate baptism, don't we? We have a service coming up on the 18th. Listen: Scripture *commands* us to be baptized. It is not an option. It is a command. If you have not been baptized, please: I'm exhorting you: you must be baptized. Take your stand. Make your faith clear. Be baptized. Take a card right now, put your name and contact info on it, and check “getting baptized.”

The other sacrament we do on a regular basis when we come together is not only being IN communion, but also partaking OF communion. Sharing together with communion is our thirteenth article of faith.

Here is our statement about communion:

We believe that the Communion Supper instituted by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is a sacrament, proclaiming His life, sufferings, sacrificial death, resurrection, and the hope of His coming again. The Lord's Supper is a means of grace in which Christ is present by the Spirit. All are invited to participate by faith in Christ and be renewed in life, salvation, and in unity as the Church. All are to come in reverent appreciation of its significance, and by it show forth the Lord's death until He comes. Those who have faith in Christ and love for the saints are invited by Christ to participate as often as possible. (Church of the Nazarene)

So that's what we are going to do today. When we share together in communion, we remember what Christ did for us by dying on the cross. We celebrate and give thanks for what he's done. We offer to God ourselves as living sacrifices and consecrate ourselves to him. We commit to participate in his sufferings, and we look forward to his return. When Jesus instituted communion, he said:

"I tell you, I will not drink from this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."
(Matthew 26:29, niv)

So we know that this act is simply awaiting the ultimate Supper with the Lord!

So we are going to participate today in communion.

The Communion Supper, instituted by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is a sacrament, which proclaims His life, His sufferings, His sacrificial death, and resurrection, and the hope of His coming again. It shows forth the Lord's death until His return.

The Supper is a means of grace in which Christ is present by the Spirit. It is to be received in reverent appreciation and gratefulness for the work of Christ.

You do not have to be a member of this church to share at the table with us. *All* those who are truly repentant, forsaking their sins, and believing in Christ for salvation are invited to participate in the death and resurrection of Christ. We come to the table that we may be renewed in life and salvation and be made one by the Spirit.

In unity with the Church, we confess our faith: (*repeat after me*) Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again. And so we pray:

Holy God, We gather at this, your table, in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, who by your Spirit was anointed to preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, set at liberty those who are oppressed. Christ healed the sick, fed the hungry, ate with sinners, and established the new covenant for forgiveness of sins. We live in the hope of His coming again.

On the night in which He was betrayed, He took bread, gave thanks, broke the bread, gave it to His disciples, and said: "This is my body which is given for you; do this in remembrance of me."

Likewise, when the supper was over, He took the cup, gave thanks, gave it to His disciples, and said: "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. Do this in remembrance of me." (Matthew 26:27-29, Luke 22:19)

And so, we gather as the Body of Christ to offer ourselves to you in praise and thanksgiving. Pour out your Holy Spirit on us and on these your gifts. Make them by the power of your Spirit to be for us the body and blood of Christ that we may be for the world the Body of Christ, redeemed by His blood.

By your Spirit make us one in Christ, one with each other, and one in the ministry of Christ to all the world, until Christ comes in final victory. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

And now, as our Savior Christ has taught us, let us pray the Lord's Prayer (we'll use the word "sins" – "forgive us our sins"):

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For yours is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen. (Matthew 6:9-13)

The body of our Lord Jesus Christ, broken for you, preserve you blameless, unto everlasting life. Eat this in remembrance that Christ died for you, and be thankful.

The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, shed for you, preserve you blameless unto everlasting life. Drink this in remembrance that Christ died for you, and be thankful.

Prepare your heart and mind for this time, and when you are ready, you may come to the table nearest to you, receive the bread, dip it into the cup and eat, and return to your seat. The bread is gluten-free.

The role of worship is to gather together, and then to be sent out, whether individually or collectively, to live out the...

3. Mission of the Church

So at West Valley Church, we've taken what the Scriptures have to say in Matthew 22:36-40, Matthew 28:18-20, and Acts 1:8, and we've combined them into our mission:

Introduce People to Jesus Christ,
Equip People with a Faith that Works,
Live as People with Purpose.

Let's take those in reverse order:

Folks, if we are consecrating ourselves to Christ to be filled with the Holy Spirit, then we have a purpose to carry out until Christ returns. We are to live out our

purpose: to love ALL people the way God loves them, and to demonstrate and declare the good news that God loves them and Jesus died for them.

When we do that individually and collectively, we are carrying out the church's mission. We do that because we are being equipped here at our church with a faith that works – it works in our lives, and we have such faith that we are going to get to work for Christ. We provide means through which your faith can grow as your faith works *for* you – in small groups primarily, and in classes and other ways. But also so you can put your faith *to* work.

Just four days ago we had 2000 people come through our doors. We loved them, we showed them hospitality, and we invited them to join us for Breakfast with Santa and Upward Soccer and Caravan – all Children's Ministries at which they will hear the Gospel clearly declared, multiple times, and they will be given the opportunity to accept Christ. Trunk or Treat is a doorway outreach that builds relationship and demonstrates God's love.

That's why we serve the children of our community through our work with Wide Hollow and Mountainview – to bless, to serve, and to build relationship through Homework Club, through Backpack to School, through Summer Science Camps and Science Night on Tuesdays. These are opportunities to show God's love and to share God's love, so that we can declare God's love and give them multiple chances to respond to it. Don't mistake why we do what we do; we do it to live our lives with purpose through our faith that works.

We do all this because we have the Holy Spirit in us and together we are Christ's body in West Valley and in this world. We are the means through which God introduces people to Jesus Christ.

The Holy Spirit, through the Church, is *IT*. And being *IT* – introducing people to Jesus – is why we are here. As long as we haven't died yet, and as long as Jesus hasn't come back yet, *that* is our purpose on this earth – if we are a Christ-believing, Spirit-filled church: to introduce people to Jesus, to equip people with a faith that works, and to live as people with purpose.

You come here on Sunday to prepare yourself to do *that* during the week, individually, through your small group, and through the organized church ministries and activities.

Are you prepared to do that?

11. We believe in **the Church**, the community that confesses Jesus Christ as Lord, the covenant people of God made new in Christ, the Body of Christ called together by the Holy Spirit through the Word.

God calls the Church to express its life in the unity and fellowship of the Spirit; in worship through the preaching of the Word, observance of the sacraments, and ministry in His name; by obedience to Christ, holy living, and mutual accountability.

The mission of the Church in the world is to share in the redemptive and reconciling ministry of Christ in the power of the Spirit. The Church fulfills its mission by making disciples through evangelism, education, showing compassion, working for justice, and bearing witness to the kingdom of God.

The Church is a historical reality that organizes itself in culturally conditioned forms, exists both as local congregations and as a universal body, and also sets apart persons called of God for specific ministries. God calls the Church to live under His rule in anticipation of the consummation at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

(Exodus 19:3; Jeremiah 31:33; Matthew 8:11; 10:7; 16:13-19, 24; 18:15-20; 28:19-20; John 17:14-26; 20:21-23; Acts 1:7-8; 2:32-47; 6:1-2; 13:1; 14:23; Romans 2:28-29; 4:16; 10:9-15; 11:13-32; 12:1-8; 15:1-3; 1 Corinthians 3:5-9; 7:17; 11:1, 17-33; 12:3, 12-31; 14:26-40; 2 Corinthians 5:11-6:1; Galatians 5:6, 13-14; 6:1-5, 15; Ephesians 4:1-17; 5:25-27; Philippians 2:1-16; 1 Thessalonians 4:1-12; 1 Timothy 4:13; Hebrews 10:19-25; 1 Peter 1:1-2, 13; 2:4-12, 21; 4:1-2, 10-11; 1 John 4:17; Jude 24; Revelation 5:9-10)

13. We believe that the **Communion** Supper instituted by our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is a sacrament, proclaiming His life, sufferings, sacrificial death, resurrection, and the hope of His coming again. The Lord's Supper is a means of grace in which Christ is present by the Spirit. All are invited to participate by faith in Christ and be renewed in life, salvation, and in unity as the Church. All are to come in reverent appreciation of its significance, and by it show forth the Lord's death until He comes. Those who have faith in Christ and love for the saints are invited by Christ to participate as often as possible.

(Exodus 12:1-14; Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20; John 6:28-58; 1 Corinthians 10:14-21; 11:23-32)