Question 1

Can a person be a Christian without the Church?

Yes / No

This is a trick question, because answering with a definitive "yes" or "no" will come across as controversial. While this study will lean hard in to a "NO" answer, a key distinction is between "professing belief" and "living faith." Many people say they believe in God, or even that Jesus is the Son of God and Savior of the world. But Christian faith is more than agreeing with those statements. A Christian is someone who trusts in Christ and is joined to His body, the Church. **This doesn't mean that we are saved by faith in Jesus and by being a member of church.** Rather it means that faith in Christ draws us into participation in the body of Christ, which is his Church. Jesus joins believers to His body, and real faith wants to hear His Word, receive His gifts, and live with His people. For that reason, while a person may at times be separated from the Church by circumstance, no Christian is meant to live apart from it or treat it as optional. Jesus does not save us into isolation but into His body. This does not mean that a Christian is lost every time he is cut off from the visible church by circumstance. But it does mean that Christ does not intend His people to treat the Church as optional or live in prolonged spiritual isolation. Faith needs the body of Christ. Just like a hand could not be separated from the body and live on its own. So also, faith is not meant to endure apart from Christ's body and gifts."*

† Big Idea:

God _____does not intend for Christians to live the faith completely on their own.

A lot of people say stuff like, "I can believe in God without going to church," or "My faith is personal, so I don't need church." But the Bible talks about faith differently.

How would you complete the following sentences:

① Biblical faith isn't just something we make up on our own or keep strong by ourselves. The Bible is very clear that faith is....

....something God gives and sustains through real things: His Word, His people, and His gifts in Baptism and the Lord's Supper. Faith is never described as something we self-generate or maintain in isolation.

BIBLICAL SUPPORT:
Consider how these verses apply.

Ephesians 2:8–9
Romans 10:17
1 Corinthians 10:16
Acts 2:41-42
Titus 3:5
Matthew 18:20
Hebrews 12:2

Ephesians 4:11–16
1 Timothy 3:15
1 Corinthians 12
Acts 20:28
1 Peter 3:21
Matthew 26:26–28
Hebrews 10:24–25

② While "church" can be many things and look like many things, at the most fundamental level, the Church is essential because through "church," our Lord provides....

...many, many blessings that would be hard to sustain a LIVING faith without. Church is a place where we can hear and receive the Gospel, forgiveness, the sacraments, Christian community and we can participate in the work of the Kingdom of God. Where else can we receive all these things? Answer: likely nowhere on earth but in the true Church—not all at once. These gifts belong properly to the Church's life and are ordinarily received where believers gather around Christ's Word and Sacraments.

Notice too, how "church" is either capitalized or lower case, depending on how we use the word. While this is just a writing convention, the capital "C" implies that the "Church" is the place—anyplace—where God is at work to bring His gifts to His people. Lowercase "c" church is where we worship and join as members. These two are not always exactly the same. Not all lowercase "c" churches—local congregations—are equally faithful. Some churches obscure the Gospel or mishandle the Sacraments. Yet wherever the Gospel is truly preached and the Sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution, there the true Church is present." Additionally, we must recognize that lowercase "c" church looks different in different places, cultures, and circumstances and at different times in history. But again, any church that faithfully proclaims the Gospel and gives the sacraments is a part of the true Church!

DIGGING DEEPER

† A helpful analogy might be: faith is like a smartphone—it cannot function well without connection to its source. How might this analogy be helpful? Where does it fall short?

A phone may still look fine on the outside, but without power, signal, or updates, it quickly becomes ineffective. In a similar way, Christians are not designed to operate disconnected from Christ's gift.

Where it falls short: A phone is a machine; a Christian is a person
A phone works automatically when plugged in. People do not relate to Christ mechanically. Faith is not a battery charge or a technical process. **It is a living**

relationship created and sustained by the Holy Spirit through the Word and Sacraments. Also, if "connection to its source" means Christ, that is good. But if the source is simply "the institution of the Church," then the analogy can mislead. Christians are united first to Christ, and through Him to His Church.

† Many people say, "I can worship God in nature," or "I feel closest to God when I'm alone," or even "Church in my car works just fine." Is there truth in this?

There is some truth here. God's creation does testify to His power and wisdom. Listening to sermons or Christian music while driving can be spiritually beneficial. God can certainly use these things. But we must ask: Do these things actually proclaim the Gospel? Does nature tell you that your sins are forgiven through the death and resurrection of Jesus? Does a quiet walk in the woods speak absolution to a guilty conscience? Does a mountain announce, "Christ gave His body and blood for you"? Nature can reveal God's power, but it does not specifically proclaim the saving Gospel.

DIVINE WORSHIP!!!! What is that?

ALSO NOTE: private listening can become selective—podcasts, online material, devotional reading--we can easily choose only what interests us, what we already agree with, or emotionally prefer. Self-directed spirituality can be a problem because **we remain in control**. We can avoid hard truths, difficult correction, and the parts of God's Word we do not want to hear. In the Church, by contrast, we are placed under the Word, not above it. It's not that these things are bad. They can be a great way to strengthen our faith. But they are not a full substitute for the Church's gathered life.

† Read Ephesians 5:21–32. At the end of this passage, why is it significant that Paul says, "Christ and the Church," not simply "Christ and the individual"?

While Paul is speaking about marriage, it is striking that he ends by saying he is ultimately speaking about Christ and the Church. Marriage is an intimate union in which two become one, and just as no one can marry himself, so also the Church is a relationship between the Lord and His people. That is Paul's ultimate point: Christ does not relate merely to isolated individuals floating free from one another. He binds Himself to His Bride, the Church. Paul does not say that marriage is mainly a picture of Christ and "me as an individual." He says that it refers to Christ and the Church. This is not to dismiss our personal relationship, it's just a reminder that we are together the body of Christ, the bride, the church.

† Why do Baptism and the Lord's Supper require the Church?
Simple. You cannot baptize yourself. You cannot commune yourself in isolation from Christ's institution of His Supper in the gathered Church. These gifts are not things we do for ourselves; they are gifts God gives **to us** through His Church.

In **Baptism**, God brings us into His family, joins us to Christ, and places His name on us. In **the Lord's Supper**, Christ gives us His true body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. They are gifts Christ has entrusted to His Church. The Lord's Supper is not a private ritual we invent for ourselves. It belongs to Christ's gathered Church and is received according to His institution

† In order to understand the importance of the church community in the believer's life in the New Testament, you gotta know a little Texan. In Texas we have the plural 2nd person pronoun "y'all."

Consider these verses:
Philippians 1:6
He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion…

1 Corinthians 6:19–20
Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you…

Philippians 1:27
Only let your manner of life be worthy of the Gospel…

In these examples, Paul is not speaking to an individual. The "you" and "your" in each verse is plural. So, who is he speaking to?

Often, when Paul says "you," he is speaking to **the church collectively**—the congregation in Philippi, Corinth, and elsewhere. Most of the "you's" are "y'all", that is, a plural "you." That does not mean these words do not apply to individual Christians. They do. But they apply in their fullest sense to the community of believers.

This matters because modern readers often individualize everything. We hear Scripture as if God is always speaking only to "me." But very often He is speaking to **us**.

ANSWERING SOME RELATED QUESTIONS:
Some people might ask:

What if church doesn't seem helpful to me?
What if Church doesn't do anything for me and I don't feel like I'm being fed?

This should be taken seriously. But before answering such questions, we need to ask:
What is church for?

A thing can only be judged fairly according to its purpose. If someone says a restaurant is terrible because it has no Wi-Fi, that may be frustrating, but that is not the main purpose of a restaurant. A restaurant exists to serve food. If someone gives a mechanic

a bad review because the waiting-room coffee was cold, that misses the point. A mechanic exists to repair cars, not provide gourmet coffee.

So what is church for?
The Church exists to **faithfully teach God's Word** and **deliver God's grace in Christ**. This means we should not mainly judge a church by things like:

- whether the service was short,
- whether our friends go there,
- whether the music style fits our taste,
- whether it has a particular ministry we like,
- or whether the sermon was especially entertaining.

These things may matter in secondary ways, but they are not the heart of the matter. However, if a church is not preaching God's Word faithfully, then people will not be fed! So complaints about a church, may indeed reveal there is a problem with the proclamation of the Gospel. Also, sometimes a church may fail not only by weak preaching but also by spiritual abuse, negligence, or corruption. In such cases, leaving may be necessary—not to abandon the Church, but to seek a more faithful one.

What should we look for in a faithful church?
A good church is one that:

- _____faithfully teaches God's Word,
- rightly distinguishes _____Law and _____Gospel,
- points _____sinners to Christ alone for forgiveness and assurance,
- and rightly administers Baptism and the Lord's Supper.

A bad church is not simply one that feels boring, sings unfamiliar songs, or lacks a polished presentation. A bad church is one that teaches falsehood, distorts Scripture, or points people somewhere other than Jesus for salvation and peace.

Of course, the secondary matters still have value. Churches should care about hospitality, music, clarity, and removing unnecessary obstacles when possible. But these things serve the main purpose; they do not replace it. And when a faithful church is not available? When no faithful church is available, Christians should seek whatever faithful pastoral care and access to God's Word they can: Scripture, prayer, trustworthy teaching, contact with other believers, and, when possible, help from a faithful pastor or congregation.

And we pray for Christians who might struggle in this way because of circumstances like war, persecution, being homebound, etc.

Another helpful analogy:
How might Christian worship be compared to the difference between a wedding ceremony and the wedding reception (celebration)?
The ceremony is solemn, formal, and focused. Words are spoken. Promises are made. A union is established publicly.

The reception is joyful and celebratory, but it is not the same thing as the ceremony itself. It is a party. It is the living out of the joy that comes out of the solemn promises made in the ceremony. In the same way, Christian worship is more like the ceremony. There, Christ the Bridegroom comes to serve His Bride, the Church, with His Word and promises. He speaks forgiveness. He gives assurance. He joins Himself to His people through His gifts. In Lutheran terms, we would call this DIVINE WORSHIP.

This does not mean worship should be joyless. But it does mean the center of worship is not entertainment, emotional experience, or personal preference. The center is **Christ giving Himself to His people through His Word and Sacraments**.

Final Question

Several times we've mentioned in this study "the body of Christ" as the true Church. How do we know for sure if we are part of the "body?" We trust Christ's Promises! We know we belong to Christ's body because He has promised to receive sinners through the Gospel, joined us to Himself in Baptism, and continues to sustain His people through His Word and Supper. Our confidence rests not in our feelings, but in His promises.

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