

The Church

“Jesus replied, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 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. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’” (Matthew 16:17-19 NIV)

1. What is the Church?

People often think of:

- a building, with Christian symbols
- a denomination, with its own history and liturgy a social (sometimes political) organisation
- a moral pressure group
- a global community

God is a “spirit” (John 4:24). The true church is a spiritual organism, not a human organization. Important not to focus (in the first place) on creeds, traditions and rituals, but on Christ.

“And God placed all things under his 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 (Ephesians 1:22, 23, NIV)

There are important visible/invisible distinctions between Christians and the church groups to which they belong.

The Universal versus Local Church

Universal	Local
Subject to the Lordship of Christ	Notionally subject to the Lordship of Christ Local leadership (either NT-based or historical/hierarchical)
Made up of people	Made up of people
Includes all those who belong to Jesus Christ	Includes believers, but may also include unbelievers
Extent not limited to period, time or location; cannot be bound because it is God’s work	Limited to period, time or location; can be physically bound, even extinguished
Visibly only as locally expressed	Visible within a time and in a location - geographically identifiable
Structure chosen by God to carry out His purposes on earth	Structure chosen by God and implemented by man to nurture spiritual life and carry out His purposes locally (or as an extension to the local body)

In the New Testament, the word “church” refers to:

- all Christian believers, whether in heaven or on earth - Ephesians 1:22; 3:10, 21; 5:23; Colossians 1:18, 24
- a local church - Acts 5:11; 11:26; Romans 6:4; 1 Corinthians 11:18; 16:1
- a domestic church, eg “church in the house of” some individual - Romans 16:5, 23; Colossians 4:15

2. The Nature of the Church

(a) Words describing the Church

- Church of God - Acts 20:28
- Church of the Living God - 1 Timothy 3:15
- Church of the Firstborn - Hebrews 12:23
- Flock of God - 1 Peter 5:2 (Jesus is the Great Shepherd)
- The Israel of God - Galatians 6:16
- “My church” (Jesus) - Matthew 16:18

“Ekklesia” (from *ek* + *kaleo*) = “called out ones (originally a secular word). Refers in the New Testament to:

- all Christians in the world - Ephesians 5:32
- all Christians located in a single city or region - Acts 11:22; 13:1 (Antioch was the third largest city in the world); 1 Corinthians 16:1 (Galatia); 1 Corinthians 16:19 (“Asia” - Watchman Nee’s preferred model)
- a single congregation - 1 Corinthians 14:19, 35; Romans 16:5

“Church” was derived from “*kuriake*”, or “those belonging to the Kurios (Lord)” - 1 Timothy 3:15. Purchased with the blood of Jesus Christ - Acts 20:28; Ephesians 5:25; Hebrews 9:2. Sanctified and cleansed by Him - 1 Corinthians 6:11; Ephesians 5:26, 27

The word “Catholic” (*katholikos*) means “universal” - 1 Corinthians 12:14. The true church is not limited to place or ethnic group - Galatians 3:28. Judaism was narrow in (ethnic) focus, was not universal. Not normal for a Christian to live to self - Hebrews 10:25.

God shows His wisdom to the principalities and powers of the universe through the church - Ephesians 3:10.

(b) Words describing Christians

- brothers - the church is a spiritual brotherhood - Matthew 23:8; Romans 8:29; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 3:14. Believers in Christ belong to the “family” of God - Ephesians 3:15
- believers - called this because of their belief (*pistis*) in Jesus Christ
- saints - from “*hagios*”, or holy. We are separated to God. Christians in the New Testament were frequently referred to as “saints” - Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2; Ephesians 1:1
- the “elect” - Christians have been chosen by God according to His foreknowledge (not exclusive pre-determination) - Romans 8:33; Colossians 3:12; 1 Peter 1:2; 5:13

- disciples - a disciple is a learner; the Holy Spirit is our Teacher. He also appoints and gives teachers to the church
- Those of “the Way” -lived a unique way of life, of commitment in an age of cultural relativism - Acts 9:2. Jesus is “the way”
- “Christians” - first used as an insult, or communal label, in the city of Antioch - Acts 11:26; 26:28. Called this because of their identification with Jesus Christ. Suffered for this - 1 Peter 4:6

3. Illustrations of the Church

(a) Body of Christ

We are the Body of Christ - 1 Corinthians 12:27; Ephesians 1:23; Colossians 1:24. His representatives on earth. Incorporation in this Body is the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit; not an act of mankind - John 1:13; 1 Corinthians 12:13. A body is an organism, not an organisation; only organisms have life.

Christ is the Head, and we are subject to Him - Ephesians 1:22; 5:23, 24; Romans 7:4

Each one of us has a function in the Body - 1 Corinthians Chapter 12

(b) Temple of God

The New Testament uses the analogy of a building - 1 Corinthians 3:9. In relationship with one another, we are God’s temple - 1 Peter 2:5, 6; 2 Corinthians 6:16. His “dwelling place”; see also Ephesians 2:21, 22; 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17. Described as the House of God - 1 Timothy 3:15; Hebrews 10:21; Ephesians 2:19. We offer spiritual sacrifices - Romans 12:1 (including sacrifices of prayer and thanksgiving).

The concept of a building implies individual stones, interrelated parts/members built into a whole; Christ is the foundation stone - 1 Corinthians 3:11; Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:4, 6.

(c) Bride of Christ

“Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Ephesians 5:22)

A beautiful picture of the mystical but real union between Jesus Christ and the church - Ephesians 5:25-27; 2 Corinthians 11:2,3; Revelation 19:7; 21:2, 22:17. Paul’s use of this analogy also speaks about the moral purity required of the church. However, purity without love is meaningless, often based on (or leads to) legalism. The “bride” picture speaks of deep and abiding *agape* love.

(d) Garden

An analogy about how the church was established and nurtured - 1 Corinthians 3:6-9.

(e) Vine and Branches

Pictures the all-sufficiency of Christ, and produced in our lives through communion with Him - John 15:1-8. All life flows through the branches that draw their life from Him. A branch can do nothing on its own; we need to remain connected to Him (and one another).

(f) Shepherd and Sheep

Pictures the helplessness of believers with Christ's leadership and tender love - John 10:11

Jesus is the great shepherd, who sustains and supplies believers with every good thing, in the plan of God - Hebrews 13:20, 21

The Chief Shepherd, the returning Lord, is the source of eternal blessings and reward for those who follow Him - 1 Peter 5:4

4. Founding of the Church

(a) Prophetically Considered

Israel was also known as the "ekklesia" (used in the Septuagint); "called out of Egypt (Hosea 11:1); called from the time of Abraham to be God's special people - Isaiah 41:8, 9. The church replaced Israel's congregation, continuing God's work on earth - Matthew 16:18.

(b) Historically Considered

The church came into existence on the Day of Pentecost Acts Chapter 2
Built on the foundation of the Apostles - Ephesians 2:20 (see also Acts 2:42).

5. Membership of the Church

Some denominations (and the cults) falsely teach that they are the only church. Who makes up the church? What conditions defined New Testament believers?

- faith in Jesus Christ alone for salvation - Acts 16:31
- submission to baptism as confirmation of that faith - Acts 2:38
- confession of belief in Christ as the risen Lord - Romans 10:9, 10
- identification as Christians - Matthew 10:32
- fruitful lives as evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit - Galatians 5:22, 23

God is the one who adds to the church - Acts 2:47; 5:14; 11:24. However, until the return of Christ, the physical church will consist of true and false believers - Matthew 13:36-43, 47-49.

There is no formal "membership: in the Biblical sense. Membership does, however, represent a commitment to work for Christ with a particular group of Christians (not exclusive).

The church is expected to function in unity - Romans 12:5; 1 Corinthians 10:17; 12:12; Galatians 3:28. True unity is not an organisational issue, but a work of the Holy Spirit, based on mutual submission under the Headship of Christ.

6. Work of the Church

- (a) To witness to the truth and to preach the Good News in the whole world
-the Great Command (Great Commission) - Matthew 28:18-20

To reach people, win them, establish them as Christians.

- (b) To provide means of corporate worship

Worship is an attitude rather than a place, but Christians gather in places to worship the Lord. Our gatherings should be characterized by prayer and adoration - Matthew 21:13. We should not neglect coming together as believers - Hebrews 10:25.

- (c) To provide fellowship

All Christians need fellowship (*koinonia*, or working together), not merely as a social activity, but a deep spiritual need of those who have Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord and God as father in "common union". We live in a very individualistic society, but the Holy Spirit places us in relationship with other believers. However, fellowship alone is not enough. Freemasons talk of "fellowship", as do academic groups. True fellowship strengthens and encourages us in our relationship with Christ, as members of God's family - Ephesians 4:11-16.

The local church is our base, the place in which we meet with other Christians, grow spiritually, receiving training to work with God and do His work and recuperate in times of personal battles.

The church can function as

- a place for the development of spiritual gifts
- a hospital for the wounded
- a forum for Christian education
- a "safe" place for Christians and their families

- (d) To uphold a moral standard

The church is:

- the light of the world, to dispel darkness, illuminate lives - Matthew 5:14-16
- the salt of the earth, to preserve from corruption and season society - Matthew 5:13; Colossians 4:5, 6; upholding God's ways and standard in the world.

7. Ordinances of the Church

Evangelical Christians believe that *two* ceremonies/ordinances - baptism and communion:

- (a) Baptism

Symbolizes entrance into the church, a spiritual transaction by the Holy Spirit. The Bible does not teach "baptismal regeneration" (being born again through baptism).

Mode - "baptizo" means to dip, immerse; there is no basis for sprinkling of infants in the New Testament, early Christian literature or records.

Formula - in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit - Matthew 28:18-20.

- baptism "in the name of Jesus (eg Acts 2:38) implies association and authority, not formula. A few churches teach baptism in the name of "Jesus only", going so far as to insist that members who have come from other churches be "re-baptised"; however, there is no Biblical justification for this distinction.

Recipients - all who confess faith in Jesus Christ for salvation. The early church emphasized:

- profession of faith - Acts 8:37 prayer - Acts 22:16
- vow of consecration - 1 Peter 3:21
- baptism as soon as possible after conversion - Acts 2:41; 8:12

Power - baptism is an outward sign of an inner faith. The act of baptism does not save us, but obedience to Jesus Christ expects it.

Meaning - baptism depicts:

- salvation - death with Christ, followed by burial and resurrection - Romans 6:3-5
- an outward expression of inner life of repentance - Acts 2:38
- “washing” associated with re-birth - Titus 3:5
- obedience - Acts 22:16
- “putting on” Christ - Galatians 3:27

(b) The Lord’s Supper

The Lord’s Supper, or Communion (as instituted by Jesus prior to his crucifixion), is a commemoration:

- foreshadowed in the Old Testament Passover > deliverance from Egypt - Exodus 13, 14; this event was a shadow of our deliverance from sin
- “in remembrance of Jesus Christ, His redemptive act and the expectation of His return - 1 Corinthians 11:23-26

Communion also contains a reminder - of the incarnation of Christ - the Word made flesh - John 1:14; the Bread of Heaven - John 6:33

- A summary of substitutionary atonement - Jesus’ body was broken and His blood was shed for our salvation

Bread and wine do not *become* the body and blood of Christ (*transubstantiation*).

Inspiration - communion calls us to deeper fellowship with Jesus Christ.

Assurance - the cup is a sign of the New Testament, or agreement, in Christ’s blood, which is sufficient for cleansing and restoring us to right relationship with God.

Responsibility - all Christians may partake; however Scripture reminds us that should eat and drink “worthily”, recognizing the body and blood of Christ.

For Roman Catholics, there are *seven* ordinances, or sacraments. The Council of Trent identified: baptism, confirmation, Holy Eucharist (Communion), penance, extreme unction, orders, and matrimony (marriage).

8. Worship of the Church

The early Christians had both celebratory services (which non-Christians might attend, and where they might hear the Gospel) and Love Feasts for the Christian community (cf Jude 12).

Breaking of bread - Acts 2:42 - often occurred in homes - Acts 2:46. The early church did not have buildings after expulsion from the synagogue community. The very first Christians were Jews first, Christianity was seen as a sect of Judaism, so the pattern of the church in first few chapters of Acts was not necessarily adopted by Gentile Christians. The shift in balance to majority Gentile membership changed practices.

Christians continue to meet for:

- teaching and correction
- fellowship, mutual support
- edification (lit. building up)
- prayer
- worship
- practical sanctification
- release and use of spiritual gifts
- helping those in need.

9. Organisation of the Church

(a) Government

Jesus did not impose a strict church model. Nor did He (or NT writers) distinguish between clergy and “laity” (from “laos” = people). The distinction has led to many abuses, as well as neglecting God-given ministries in the church.

This does not imply the church has no organisation. God has given “ministries” to the church. Christ is the Head. Early Christians were established in the “Apostles’ Doctrine”. They met in homes, at the temple and in synagogues (while Christianity was regarded as an offshoot of Judaism - Acts 2:26). Deacons were added to assist with practical issues associated with the growing number of believers - Acts 6

Government in the early church was often conducted on the basis of broad consultation and the sense of what the Holy Spirit was saying and doing - Acts 6:3-6; 15:22; 1 Corinthians 16:3; 2 Corinthians 8:19; Galatians 2:10; 3 John 8.

Today, churches fall into a number of discrete groups, as far as government is concerned:

- “episcopalian” - rule by bishop and priesthood (also known as “sacerdotalism”)
- “presbyterian” - rule by the presbytery, or eldership
- “congregational” - rule by the congregation
- Some style themselves on their founders, eg Lutherans, Wesleyans and Maronites.
- Some are linked to nationalism, eg Church of England, Church of Scotland, Greek/Serbian/Bulgarian/Macedonian/Russian Orthodox, Croatian Catholic, Samoan Methodist, Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch and the East.
- Some use motivational names, eg Church of Christ, Assemblies of God, Brethren, Church of God, Calvary Chapel, New Testament House churches
- Names emphasize distinctives, eg Pentecostal, Baptist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Four-Square, Uniting, Congregational, Apostolic, Christian Outreach Centre, Hillsong

(b) Ministry

It is important that every person in the church find his or her place of service.

“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.”
(Ephesians 4:11-13)

The ministry (service) of the church is evident in the New Testament, but not as rigid as later on.

Apostles - received their commission from Christ; “sent ones”, eg missionaries, church planters - Romans 16:7; Galatians 2:7, 8

Prophets - endowed with gift of inspired utterance and insight.

Evangelists - carried the Gospel message to the unbelieving, eg Philip in Samaria and on the road to Gaza - Acts Chapter 8.

Pastors - shepherds who look after God's “flock” (some version link pastors and teachers).

Teachers - gifted with the capacity to expound the Word of God and provide practical teaching in Christian living, to bring people to spiritual maturity.

Local Ministries

Elders - qualifications set out in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 (role akin to pastors). New Testament churches were overseen by elders, or bishops. The notion of “one man” being in charge did not emerge until the end of the 3rd century.

Deacons (and deaconesses - Romans 16:1; Philippians 4:3) functioned as assistant rulers in individual congregations - Acts 6:1-4; 1 Timothy 3:8-13; Philippians 1:1

- Their role (more practical than governance) should not be under-estimated. To be selected they had to have a good reputation, show evidence of being filled with the Spirit, demonstrate Biblical wisdom and be trustworthy with authority. They were appointed because of pressures on other ministries, who knew they had to draw the line.

Other gifts are described in Romans 12:4-8:

“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is *prophesying*, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is *serving*, let him serve; if it is *teaching*, let him teach; if it is *encouraging*, let him encourage; if it is *contributing to the needs of others*, let him give generously; if it is *leadership*, let him govern diligently; if it is *showing mercy*, let him do it cheerfully.”

“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 4:16)