

THE CHURCH

What is the church?

I. THE CHURCH IS GOD'S FAMILY.

The New Testament word for the Church means "those who are called out," that is, those whom God has called out from the world to become His children. Whenever anyone puts his faith in Christ for salvation, he becomes a member of the family of God. The Church is made up of all of God's children all over the world, in every nation, of every race and language (Revelation 7:9).

As children of God our Father, all Christians are brothers and sisters. We are united by our faith in Christ, and the same Holy Spirit dwells within each of us (Ephesians 4:4-6). As members of the same family, it is natural for Christians to love one another, and this love proves we belong to Christ (John 13:35).

II. THE CHURCH IS GOD'S TEMPLE.

The people of Israel built a temple for God because they wanted His presence with them, even though it was not possible for God to live in such a house of wood and stone (1 Kings 8:27). But God does desire to have a dwelling place among men, and He is building Himself a temple of His own. The Church is God's temple, a house not made with human hands, a place where God Himself is pleased to dwell (Ephesians 2:19-22).

We sometimes refer to the building in which we worship as "the church," but this is not really correct. The Church is made of people, not bricks and mortar. We are all "living stones" (1 Peter 2:5), being built together to form God's house, with Jesus Christ as the cornerstone. What a glorious calling, to be a part of the temple where God lives!

III. THE CHURCH IS THE BODY OF CHRIST.

When the Son of God became man, He walked the earth in a physical body just like yours and mine. When He ascended into heaven after His resurrection, He sent His Holy Spirit so that His presence would remain here on the earth. But He also maintains a physical presence here, a body for His Holy Spirit to live in. The Church is now Christ's body on the earth (1 Corinthians 12:12-13).

Just as our physical bodies are made up of many different parts with many different functions, so also Christ's body on earth is composed of many different people with many different roles and abilities (1 Corinthians 12:14-20). As members of the Church, we have different jobs according to the place God assigns us in the Body, but we all work together. Each member has its place; all are needed, and none is left out. It is only together that we can fulfill our role as the Body of Christ, carrying out His will on the earth.

IV. THE CHURCH IS THE BRIDE OF CHRIST.

When Jesus lived and ministered on earth, He never took a wife. But He shed His blood and sacrificed His life in order to cleanse and sanctify a people who would become His bride (Ephesians 5:25-27). The Church is called the bride of Christ because He loves us, and wants to be united with us in an intimate relationship that will bear fruit for Him.

As Christ's bride, the Church is called to be pure and holy. We are to remain faithful to Him, never allowing our affections to be stolen by the things of this world. As Christ has loved us supremely and sacrificially, we give Him our love in return, and faithfully await the day when He returns to take us to Himself (Revelation 19:7).

What about all the different churches?

There is a single global Church, a divinely-created spiritual organism, which includes every believer in Christ throughout the world. The members of God's Church are listed in the Lamb's Book of Life, whether or not their names are found on

the membership roll of any manmade organization. The unity of the Church is spiritual, not organizational.

The one universal Church of God is made up of many local churches. In addition, these local churches often form larger groups or denominations in order to help each other and cooperate in serving God. Such denominations can combine the efforts of local churches to make them more effective. Denominations can also provide accountability and oversight to insure that local churches and pastors remain Biblical in doctrine and practice.

Some denominations came into being in order to preserve certain truths that were neglected at the time. Others were started in times of revival, when God was doing something that not all current churches were willing to accept. Today different denominations typically reflect differences in styles of worship or disagreements over certain doctrines.

Denominations can play an important role in unifying and supervising God's churches, and are deserving of respect and loyalty for the work they do. But it is never God's will that they become sources of division among His people, competing with or attacking one another. God is pleased and glorified when Christians work and fellowship together across denominational lines, thus bearing witness to their unity in Christ.

What is the structure of the church?

There is only one Head of the Church, Jesus Christ (Ephesians 1:22). He is the one supreme authority to which all believers must submit.

God has ordained that there be other leaders in the church to exercise authority in submission to the Head. He has not given a detailed blueprint as to how churches should be organized, leaving congregations and denominations with a great deal of freedom to establish their own structure within the guidelines of Scripture.

According to Scripture, the spiritual leaders in the local church are the pastors and elders. Sometimes called bishops or

overseers, these leaders are responsible for the spiritual oversight of the flock under their care. They are to insure that the members of the church are taught the truth and built up in the faith, and are responsible for exercising discipline when necessary. They are to be obeyed (Hebrews 13:17) and honored (1 Timothy 5:17). They must meet high standards of character and conduct (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

Deacons have responsibility for the business affairs of the church and the physical needs of its members (Acts 6:1-4). They, too, must meet strict standards of dependability and trustworthiness (1 Timothy 3:8-13).

Some ecclesiastical offices – apostles, prophets, evangelists (Ephesians 4:11) – have a broader scope. These individuals are called and gifted to serve throughout the larger body rather than within a single local church.

The church is free to select and appoint other officers and leaders as necessary. But all leadership in God's church is to be servant leadership (1 Peter 5:1-3). While God gives authority to those who watch over His people, it is an authority always to be exercised in love, following the example set by Christ (John 13:13-17).

What does the church do?

1. THE CHURCH MINISTERS TO GOD.

The church is called to *worship*. We were redeemed in order to praise and glorify our Father and Redeemer (1 Peter 2:9). God's people are a people of praise, for they have tasted the goodness of the Lord, and know His marvelous love and grace.

As a church we gather together to unite our voices in songs of praise, and testify to what the Lord has done for us. We lift our hands and our hearts up to the Lord, offering ourselves individually and corporately as sacrifices unto Him (Romans 12:1). God is worthy of our worship, and it is our privilege and our delight to give our best to honor and praise Him.

2. THE CHURCH MINISTERS TO ITS MEMBERS.

The church is called to *discipleship*. The members of the body are to use their gifts to serve and build up one another, so that the whole body will grow into what it is meant to be in Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13). This growth takes place through several kinds of ministry (Acts 2:42):

- **Prayer** -- The church comes together to pray, the members interceding for one another's needs and finding strength in united prayer.
- **Preaching** -- The church gathers to hear the Word of God proclaimed and explained, the members receiving its truth to penetrate and transform their hearts.
- **Fellowship** -- The church partakes together of the Lord's Supper, the members proclaiming their unity in Christ, and showing it by encouraging each other, bearing each other's burdens, sharing with those in need, and simply loving each other.

3. THE CHURCH MINISTERS TO THE WORLD.

The church is called to *witness*. It is the responsibility of the church to proclaim the message of Christ, both in the local community and to the world at large (Acts 1:8). We must evangelize at home and also send missionaries to other lands (Matthew 28:19-20).

We bear witness to Christ through word and deed, both explaining and demonstrating the truth of the gospel. The love and unity we demonstrate as Christians serve as a powerful testimony to the reality of Christ among us (John 17:23).

Above all, we are called as a church to follow in the footsteps of Christ, for we are His body on the earth (John 17:18). We are to pattern our ministry after His, speaking His words, doing His works, loving with His love. We are to continue the life and ministry He began, through His Spirit who lives within us (John 14:12).

Is it necessary to join a local church?

There are two powerful reasons why every Christian should belong to a local church.

1. You need the local church.

As believers in Christ, we all belong to His worldwide church, but we can only experience what this means as part of a local fellowship of believers. The local church provides nurture for our growth, encouragement when we are struggling, instruction in the truth, and protection from the enemy. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we pray together, laugh together, cry together, live together (1 Corinthians 12:26).

We are all members of the body of Christ, but no member can function on its own. Separated from the rest of the body, it is dead and useless. You can never achieve God's purpose for your life alone, for you were made to fit into your place in the body. God has gifted all of us to work for Him, but none of us is gifted to work alone.

2. The local church needs you.

The local church needs your ministry. The church is not complete without you. The gifts God has given you are meant to be used to help your fellow Christians (1 Corinthians 14:26). You may think there is nothing you can do, but God knows better. He has no useless members in His body (1 Corinthians 12:27).

The local church needs your prayers. The church leadership and the rest of your fellow believers need your prayer support. You need to pray for them, and with them.

The local church needs your financial support. The tasks God has called His church to do require the resources of His people. If the local church is to fulfill its calling to worship the Lord, disciple believers, and evangelize the lost at home and abroad, you must contribute your share.

The Lord urges us to commit ourselves to the local church (Hebrews 10:24-25). Faithfulness to His body is faithfulness to Him.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Read Ephesians 4:1-16.

1. What are some different aspects of the unity of the church (vv. 4-6)?

2. What must we do to maintain this unity (vv. 1-3)?

3. For what purpose does Christ give different ministers to the church (vv. 11-13)?

4. What happens when the church functions as it should (vv. 14-16)?