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What Is “The Church”?

A man from another country and culture wanted to travel to the USA for a long visit. Having worked hard to learn English, he believed that he was ready for his trip. He made his long-awaited trip to America, and soon after his arrival, his knowledge of English was put to the test. He went into a small grocery store to buy several items. At the counter, he was told how much he owed. He reached into his pocket, took out his money, counted the right amount, and handed it to the clerk. He put his groceries in a sack and started to leave. As he was going out the door, the clerk kindly said, “Come back!” The visitor stopped, turned around, and came back to the counter. The clerk said, “May I help you?” Somewhat confused, the man said, “You told me to come back!”

The man had taken an expression which meant “Thank you for your business; let us help you again soon” and had interpreted it literally. His mistake in understanding the clerk’s intended meaning resulted in a failure in communication.

All of us have had his kind of experience. We knew the words which were spoken to us, but we did not understand how those words were being used by the one speaking. We understood the words but completely missed the meaning that was being conveyed.

Any way you look at it, communication is difficult. Much is required of the speaker and of the hearer for communication to take place.

Consider the process of communication with regard to studying the Bible. For profitable communication between the Bible and us to take place, we must not only listen to the words that were used, but we must also seek the meaning which the inspired writer had in mind as he chose these words. This means that we must make an effort to understand the context in which a word or sentence appears. Honesty with God demands that we carefully search for the meaning which God intended for His message.

The word "church" is familiar to most of us. God talks to us at length about this word in the Scriptures. For communication to occur between God and us regarding this word, we must be willing to go into the biblical world and see the word meanings, illustrations, and thought forms which were used by Jesus, the apostles, and the other inspired men who wrote the Bible through God's Spirit.

What is "the church"? As the New Testament uses this word 114 times¹ in various contexts, in seventeen of its twenty-seven books,² what is being communi-

¹Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1975), 153.

²Ibid. The word "church" is not used in Mark, Luke, John, 2 Timothy, Titus, 1 and 2 Peter, 1 and 2 John, or Jude.

cated to us? When Jesus established the church, what did He build?

A SPIRITUAL BODY

We must first recognize that the church is a spiritual body, the very spiritual body of Christ.

A picture which usually comes to our minds with the word "church" is a physical building in which worship takes place. The word is never used in the New Testament, though, to convey this meaning.

In the Scriptures, the word "church" denotes the body of those who have yielded to the gospel of Christ and have been redeemed by the blood of Christ in their assembled, local, and universal senses.

First, the body of the redeemed as they assemble or gather to worship God is called "the church." As Paul rebuked the church at Corinth for their lack of unity when they gathered, he used the word "church" for the assembly of Christians. He said, ". . . when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; . . ." (1 Corinthians 11:18).

Next, "church" is used for the body of the redeemed in a definite locale. The body of redeemed ones at Corinth is called "the church of God which is at Corinth" (1 Corinthians 1:2a).

Still further, "church" is used for the whole number of the redeemed ones throughout the world. Paul referred to the church in a universal sense when he said, "For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body" (Ephesians 5:23).

Let us apply these New Testament uses of the word "church" to a specific event in Acts. The many residents and visitors in Jerusalem on the Day of

Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4) heard the external signs of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and gathered around the apostles to see what was taking place. As Peter preached to the multitude, he convinced them that Jesus was both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). In pain of soul, many cried out, “What shall we do?” (Acts 2:37b). Since faith prompted their crying out, Peter did not need to tell them to believe, but he did need to tell them to do what they had not done—to repent and be baptized for the forgiveness of their sins (Acts 2:38). Three thousand gladly received the way of salvation, repented, and were baptized for the forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38, 41).

Notice how Luke described what took place on that day. He first described the converts in terms of what they *had become* (Acts 2:41). Those who were obedient to the Word of the Lord were made into the Lord’s church. They became part of a fellowship, a group. Second, Luke described them in terms of their *new behavior*. They had a new life in their behavior *toward God* (Acts 2:42). This body of redeemed people worshiped God and received divine instruction from the apostles. They had a new life in their behavior *toward each other* (Acts 2:44, 45). They looked out after each other, by bearing, sharing, and caring—bearing each other’s burdens, sharing with those in need, and caring for each other. This body of believers is referred to later in Acts as the “church” (Acts 5:11).

When these redeemed ones in Jerusalem came together to worship God, they were “the church” (in the assembled sense). All the redeemed in Jerusalem could be referred to as “the church in Jerusalem” (in the local sense). As that church grew and spread, all the redeemed people in the world at that time could be

referred to by saying, "When Jesus comes again, He is going to receive His church (in the universal sense) and take it to heaven."

A LIVING ORGANISM

Second, we need to see the church as an organism—a living thing.

Some think of the group of saved people called "the church" as an organization, as some kind of human club. They view it as something one joins or pledges himself to, and nothing more.

As a body of redeemed people, the church is a living organism, not a human organization. The church which Christ established is living and vibrant with God's life and blessings; it is not a man-made group which is energized completely by man's wisdom, designs, and activities.

Paul described the church at Corinth as the temple, the sanctuary, or the dwelling place of God. "Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?" he said in 1 Corinthians 3:16.³ Later, in 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20, Paul pictured the individual Christian as the temple of God as he condemned fornication as a sin against a person's body. First Corinthians 3:16 is a reference to the church, not the individual Christian.⁴ Paul was affirming that God dwells among His people. He dwells in His

³The Greek language has two words for "temple": *naos* and *hieron*. The word for "temple" used by Paul in this passage is *naos*, not *hieron*. *Naos* refers to the temple proper, the sanctuary—not the temple complex, as does the word *hieron*. Paul was affirming that the body of Christ is the dwelling place of God.

⁴In this sentence, the "you" is second person plural in the Greek text, indicating that a group of people are under consideration, not just an individual as in 1 Corinthians 6:19, 20.

people individually (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20) and collectively (1 Corinthians 3:16). In Old Testament times, God's dwelling place was the tabernacle in the wilderness and later the temple in Jerusalem; but in the Christian Age, according to Paul, God dwells in His church, His people.

The church can be likened to a living building. As Paul was illustrating what the Ephesian Christians had become, he said that they comprised a building which was made up of Christians and was in a constant stage of growth. Paul said, "In whom the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are being built together into a dwelling of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:21, 22). The building he described rests upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ being the chief cornerstone. The building itself is made up of Christians. It has no top or roof; it continually ascends upward as people obey the gospel and are added to it.

The church, then, is not an organization—it is a living organism inhabited by the Spirit of God. It is a body of Christians who are alive with the life of God and who form a dwelling place for God's Spirit. You could say that the church is God's earthly residence.

AN INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP

Third, the church should be thought of as an intimate relationship with Christ.

From the earthly viewpoint, it would be easy to think of membership in the church in terms of entering a special relationship with a group of people, with the people who make up the church. This view of the church, however, misses an important truth.

The church involves a vital, intimate, ongoing relationship; and that relationship centers on an intimate relationship with *Jesus*.

The continuing relationship which the church has with Jesus is so close that it is described as a body / head relationship. Christians are the body, and Jesus is the head. God has made the church the spiritual body of Christ, the visible part of the invisible Christ on earth today. As surely as the Lord needed a physical body in which to accomplish His work of redemption while on the earth, He now needs a spiritual body in which the fruit of His redemptive work can be made available to everyone, everywhere. On the Day of Pentecost, therefore, fifty days after Jesus' resurrection from the dead, the Holy Spirit descended to form the church, that spiritual body of Christ. From that day until this, every redeemed person, at the time of His redemption, is placed by the wondrous grace of God in that body.

In keeping with this relationship, the church in the New Testament is commonly called by the inspired writers the "body" of Christ (Ephesians 1:21–23; 5:23). Those who obey the gospel of Christ become, and literally function as, Christ's spiritual body on earth, led by the head, Christ Himself. So true is this that when one is baptized, the New Testament specifically says that he is baptized "into Christ" (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27), or "into one body" (1 Corinthians 12:13).

The church has the closest relationship to Jesus into which a person can enter upon this earth. The church is the fullness of Christ, for His body is the fullness of Him who fills all in all (Ephesians 1:23). Christ is the fullness of the church, for His people are

complete in Him (Colossians 2:10). The church, His body, is incomplete without Christ, the head (Ephesians 1:22). In the same way, Christ, the head, is incomplete without His body, the church (Colossians 1:18). All that the head of the church is and has belongs to the church, and all that the church is and has should belong to Christ, its head. As His church, therefore, Christians experience a daily, continual partnership with Jesus. Those in Christ are not just professors of Christianity; they are possessors of Christ. To those in His body, the fountain of the fullness of Christ is opened.

As Paul discussed the church in Ephesians 5, he compared its relationship to Christ by using the figure of the husband/wife relationship, with the husband illustrating Christ and the wife illustrating the church. He referred to this relationship first *in principle*. Christ is the head of the church even as the husband is the head of the wife (Ephesians 5:23). He spoke of this relationship second *in practice or function*. As the wife is to be subject to her husband in everything, even so the church is to be subject to Christ. It is to look to Jesus as its head, leader, and guide (Ephesians 5:24). Finally, Paul discussed this relationship *in purpose*. As a husband loves his wife, Christ loves the church and is preparing this body of believers in Him to live with Him in eternity (Ephesians 5:25–27).

The church of the New Testament, at its heart, is a relationship with Christ. It is not initially a relationship with people, but it immediately results in a relationship with other Christians, the other members of the church, even as the children of the same father are related to each other. Members of Christ's body

are members of each other, but, first and foremost, the church is Christ's body. To be members of Christ's church we must enter a relationship with Christ, a relationship so intimate and special that we are part of Him even as a body belongs to the head.

CONCLUSION

Many are confused on the proper meaning of the word "church." Such confusion need not exist, for the Bible is clear on its meaning.

What is "the church"? It is a spiritual body made up of those who have obeyed the gospel of Christ, have become His people, and are worshiping and working as His people in a given community. They wear His name and are His spiritual body on earth. They honor Christ in all things. This spiritual body is a living organism in which dwells the Spirit of the living God. Being part of the church does not mean just participating in a human organization or having membership in a group. It means having an intimate, ongoing relationship with Christ.

The church, the body of Christ, is entered by faith. This faith response involves repentance (Acts 17:30, 31), confession of Jesus as God's Son (Romans 10:10), and baptism into Christ (Romans 6:3; Galatians 3:27). At the point of baptism, one's sins are washed away and, with his new birth completed, he becomes a part of the body of Christ (Acts 2:38, 41, 47; 22:16; 1 Corinthians 12:13).

The church of the New Testament is not a denomination. Denominations are man-made; the church in the New Testament is designed, created, indwelt, and sustained by the Lord. Denominations come from the earth, from man; the New Testament church comes

from heaven, from God. The church belongs to Christ—it wears His name, meets together for His worship, does His work in the world, and is indwelt by His Spirit. (See the chart entitled “The New Testament Church” on page 170.)

The invitation is extended by Christ to all people to enter His church upon His terms of salvation (Revelation 22:17) and live in the world as His church.

STUDY QUESTIONS

(answers on page 265)

1. How necessary is it to understand how the Holy Spirit is using a word, such as the word “church,” in the Scriptures?
2. Discuss the different ways the word “church” is used in the New Testament.
3. The church is the temple of God. What does this mean in the Christian’s life today? Does this name for the church suggest how its members are to live, work, and worship?
4. In what sense is the church a “living” building?
5. In what ways can the husband/wife relationship illustrate the church’s relationship with Jesus?
6. Describe clearly how one enters Christ’s church.
7. In what sense does the church uniquely belong to Christ?

WORD HELPS

denomination—a group of religious congregations with a specific name not found in the Bible, united under a specific set of beliefs, and governed by some kind of council. *Since no denominations are found in the New Testament, this is not a Bible word.*

fellowship—sharing interests, ideals, or experiences; that love which fills Christians’ hearts for one another.

fornication—sexual sin; having a sexual relationship without being married.