

THE CHURCH THAT JESUS BUILT

We learned from Acts 2 that when a person is baptized, the Lord adds him to His church. Another passage that teaches the same truth is 1 Corinthians 12:13, which says that “we were all baptized into one body.” As we shall see, the term “body” refers to the church.

What exactly *is* the church? Many people, upon hearing the word “church,” think of some denomination. Do your best during this study to put manmade religious organizations out of your mind. We want to concentrate on the church that Jesus built (Matthew 16:18).

WHAT DOES THE WORD “CHURCH” MEAN?

The word “church” is translated from the Greek word *ekklesia*.¹ *Ekklesia* is a compound Greek word which combines the word for “call” (*kaleo*) with the preposition which means “out” or “out of” (*ek*). *Ekklesia* literally means “the called-out [ones].” The word was used in the secular world to refer to any assembly of people,² but Jesus made it a special word. When used to designate the church He built, the word refers to those who have been “called out” of the world and called into a new relationship with Jesus.³

The word “church” is used in at least three senses in the New Testament:

- Jesus used the word in the *universal* sense when He said, “upon this rock I will build My church” (Matthew 16:18). When referring to the church in the universal sense, the singular is always used, for there is only one.⁴ This is the church to which the Lord adds those who are baptized.

- *Ekklesia* can also be used in a *local* sense to refer to a local congregation. Thus we read of “the churches of Galatia” and “the churches of Asia” (1 Corinthians 16:1, 19). When someone is baptized, he becomes a member of the universal church; but he also needs to work and worship as part of a local congregation.⁵
- Occasionally, the New Testament uses the word *ekklesia* to refer to an *assembly*—Christians assembled for the purpose of worship.⁶ For instance, when Paul spoke of teaching “in the church” in 1 Corinthians 14:19, he was referring to teaching in the assembly. (Read verse 23 of that chapter; see also 1 Corinthians 11:18.)

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

People often point to a building and say, “There’s the church,” or “That’s my church.” From what we have said so far, it should be obvious that the church is not a building.⁷ Someone has said, “The church is never a place, but always a people.”

I will use the word “church” often in our studies. When I do, I refer to *those who have been saved by the blood of Jesus*.

CHURCH = SAVED

Some believe that they are saved yet insist that they are not members of any church. If they are saved, then they are members of the church—for, as we have seen, the Lord adds the saved to the church (Acts 2:47; KJV).⁸ Since the Lord adds

all the saved to the church, there are no saved people outside the church.

This truth is taught throughout the New Testament. Paul told a group of elders “to shepherd the church of God⁹ which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). Christ died for everyone (2 Corinthians 5:14, 15), but the only ones who receive the benefits of His death are those who submit to Him. In other words, the only ones who have actually been “purchased” with His blood are those in the church.

Paul wrote in Ephesians 5:23, 25, “Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Savior of the body. . . . Christ . . . loved the church and gave Himself up for her.” If you and I want to be saved, we must be part of that which Christ loves. We must be part of that for which Christ sacrificed Himself. We must be part of that which Christ will save. In other words, we must be part of the Lord’s church.

WHAT ARE THE PEOPLE CALLED?

In the New Testament, the word “church” is the most common designation for God’s people, but other terms are also used.¹⁰ Each adds to our understanding of the church.

Body

The church is sometimes called the “body.” In Ephesians 1:22, 23, Paul said that God “put all things in subjection under His [that is, Jesus’] feet, and gave Him as head over all things to *the church, which is His body*, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.”¹¹

CHURCH = BODY

In Colossians 1:18 Paul wrote that Christ “is also head of *the body, the church*.”¹²

BODY = CHURCH

The term “body” tells us that, in some regards, the church is like the human body. Christ is the head of the body (Ephesians 1:22, 23; Colossians 1:18), and Christians are individual members of the body (Romans 12:4, 5; 1 Corinthians 12:12, 18–27). The human body has many members (arms, legs, hands, and so forth), each with a different function. In the same way, the body of Christ has many members, each with a special function and each one important.

Kingdom

The church is also called the “kingdom.” After Jesus said, “upon this rock I will build My church,” He told Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven”¹³ (Matthew 16:18, 19a). Jesus used the terms “church” and “kingdom” interchangeably.

CHURCH = KINGDOM

Paul told the church in Colossae that God has “rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son” (Colossians 1:13).

The term “kingdom” tells us that those in the church are subject to King Jesus. Jesus is presently reigning on His throne in heaven (Acts 2:29–36) and will continue to “reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death” (1 Corinthians 15:25, 26).

Family

One of my favorite terms for the church is the “family” of God. Paul told Timothy that he was writing so that Christians would know how to conduct themselves “in the household of God, which is the church of the living God” (1 Timothy 3:15).¹⁴ The word “household” in this passage means “family.”¹⁵ My scholarly friend Hugo McCord translated the verse this way: “That you may know how you must conduct yourselves in God’s family.”¹⁶

CHURCH = FAMILY

In this spiritual family, God is the Father (Matthew 6:9), Jesus is the elder brother (Hebrews 2:11, 12), and Christians are brothers and sisters (James 2:15). My physical family is precious to me, but God’s spiritual family is even more precious.

The terms “church,” “body,” “kingdom,” and “family” are not synonymous; rather, they are four different ways of looking at the same group of people. Let me illustrate: I am a father, a husband, a son, and a brother. The terms “father,” “husband,” “son,” and “brother” are not synonyms, but they all apply to me. They indicate a variety of relationships that I enjoy. Even so, the four terms used to refer to the church suggest a variety of spiritual relationships:

- In relation to the world, Christians are the church—those called out of the world into Jesus.
- In relation to one another, the church is a body: Members are to function as a whole, to care for one another.
- In relation to Jesus, members of the church are His kingdom—those who have pledged their hearts and lives to Him.
- In relation to God, Christians are His family, His beloved children.

CONCLUSION

From what we have studied, it should be obvious that it is important to be part of the Lord's church. It is *essential* to be a member of the Lord's church if we desire to be saved. The important question then is "Are you a member of His church?" ❖

¹The Greek is reflected in words like "ecclesiastical."

²It is used in this sense in Acts 19:30, 32, 33, 39, 41.

³We are called by the gospel (2 Thessalonians 2:14), and we should respond to that call through faith and obedience.

⁴Ephesians 4:4 says that there is "one body"; as we will study later in this lesson, that body is the church

(Ephesians 1:22, 23).

⁵Even though the letters in the New Testament are intended for all the church, they are always addressed to local congregations. Local congregations are the practical expression of the universal church.

⁶The only scriptural way to use the phrase "going to church" is to mean going to the assembly of the saints in order to worship God.

⁷A church building can serve as a tool to help the church fulfill its mission, but the building is not the church.

⁸See the notes on Acts 2:38, 41, and 47 in the lesson "Arise, and Be Baptized."

⁹This is God, the Son. It was Jesus who purchased the church "with His own blood."

¹⁰In Jesus' kingdom parables, the kingdom/ church is compared to a field, a vineyard, and other familiar things. Thus the list of terms could be expanded.

¹¹Emphasis mine.

¹²Emphasis mine.

¹³The promise to give Peter "the keys of the kingdom" did not mean that Peter would be more important than the other apostles. Rather, as a reward for being the first to acknowledge who Jesus was, Peter would be the first one to tell people how to receive the remission of their sins (Acts 2:14–41). Peter was the first to use "the keys" to let people into the kingdom (the church), but he was not the only one. (See, for example, Acts 22:16.)

¹⁴Other passages that refer to God's household are Ephesians 2:19 and 1 Peter 4:17.

¹⁵A comparison is made between an elder's household (his family) and the household of God (God's family, the church). (See 1 Timothy 3:4, 5, 15.)

¹⁶Hugo McCord, *McCord's New Testament Translation of the Everlasting Gospel* (Henderson, Tenn.: Freed-Hardeman College, 1988), 205.

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