



Getting Back to Church

Lesson 1: What Is the Church?

Introduction

If an unbelieving friend or family member heard that you attended church and asked you, “What is a church?”, how would you answer that question? There are many people today who attend church that would have a hard time defining biblically what a church is. Why is that? Because many people have become indifferent to the church and don’t understand what it is or how important it is. Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that the word *church* “to Protestants has the sound of something infinitely commonplace, more or less indifferent and superfluous, that does not make their heart beat faster; something with which a sense of boredom is so often associated.”¹ The church must not be commonplace with Christians. It must be important to Christians and something we understand. In this lesson, we will discover what the church is and why it ought to be so important to every Christian.

The People of God

Often when people hear the word “church,” their mind immediately goes to a building. This is because we call the building where the church gathers to worship God a “church.” However, the Bible never uses the word church to identify a building. Instead, the Bible uses the word “church” to identify and describe the people of God. So, who are the people of God that are called “the church?”

A Saved People

Jesus is the first person to use the word “church” to describe the people of God in Matthew 16:18. He said, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” The Greek word for church is the word *ekklesia*. This word means “assembly, people with shared belief, congregation, or the global community of Christians.”² Since Christ is the one who builds the church, He is also the one who owns the church. He is, as Peters says, the “Chief Shepherd” of the church (1 Peter 5:4). Since Christ owns the church, that means that all those who belong to the church belong to Christ. This means that the church only consists of those who have been saved by Christ through faith in Him alone. We can say that the church consists only of God’s people who have been called by God through faith in Jesus Christ. This means that although unbelievers may attend a local church and may even be a member of a local church, they don’t truly belong to the church because the church is a saved people.

¹ https://theology.worldidea.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/ERT-41-2.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

² Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. Frederick W. Danker, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), Accordance, 304.

A Unified People

While people today belong to secular societies, social clubs, or even other religious groups, what makes a church different from those gatherings is the fact that the people who belong to the church have been saved by Christ. Those who belong to the church have understood the facts of the gospel: namely, that God is holy, that mankind are sinners, that Christ died for sinners, and that all who repent and trust in Christ are saved. It is the truth of this gospel message that unifies the people of God.

This unity is expressed in the metaphors that are used to describe the church. For example, Paul uses the metaphors of “a body” (1 Cor. 12:12–13), “a household” (Eph. 2:19), “a building” (Eph. 2:21), “a temple” (Eph. 2:21) to describe the unity of the church. Peter uses the metaphor of “a spiritual house” (1 Pet. 2:5) to describe the church. These metaphors imply that the church is a unified people. In fact, Paul says that God has composed the body of Christ in such a way that “there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another” (1 Cor. 12:25). The church is a unified people who are united by the truth of the gospel and faith in Christ.

A Gathered People

How are people in the world able to see those who are united to Christ? They can’t see a Christian’s heart. Christians don’t get a tattoo or a stamp on their forehead once they are saved. So, what is the visible manifestation of those who are unified in Christ? It is the local church. As Jeffrey D. Johnson says in *The Church: Her Nature, Authority, Purpose, and Worship*, “Those who have fellowship and communion with Christ Jesus cannot help but have fellowship and communion with each other. The local church is simply an external expression of the internal unity that Christians have with each other in Christ Jesus.”³

As those who are unified in Christ, we are commanded to meet together. The author of Hebrews says in Hebrews 10:24, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.” This gathering together is to be done for a specific purpose. The early church in Acts gathered together to listen to the apostle’s teaching, to fellowship, to break bread, and to pray (Acts 2:42). We are also called to sing together (Col. 3:16), to give (2 Cor. 9:6–7), and to edify one another (1 Cor. 14:12, 26).

An Interdependent People

As a gathered people, this means the church is not independent, but interdependent. God has established the church to depend upon one another. This is seen in many ways. First, this is seen by the illustration of the body Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 12:14–26. In verse 26 Paul says, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” This idea of suffering and rejoicing together shows the dependence that each member of the body has upon one another. Second, dependence is seen in the “one another’s” given throughout the New Testament. No one can practice the

³ Jeffrey D. Johnson, *The Church: Her Nature, Authority, Purpose, and Worship* (New Albany, MS: Media Gratiae, 2020), 17.

“one another’s” all alone. There is dependence upon each other as we obey the “one another” commands. Finally, dependence is shown through the spiritual gifts the Holy Spirit gives to believers. As each believer has been given a spiritual gift, each member of the church is to use their spiritual gift for the edification of other believers (1 Cor. 14:12).

A Submissive People

Submission is a word that many people do not like hearing. For many people, implied in submission means weakness, dependence, and inferiority. However, Jesus, the greatest and most authoritative man to ever live, lived His life in submission to the Father. Jesus said in John 6:38, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.” Jesus submitted His life to the will of the Father and did only what the Father wanted Him to do.

Just as Jesus lived in submission, the church is commanded to be submissive people too. First, we are commanded to submit to Christ. Ephesians 5:24 says, “Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands.” The church does not rule over Jesus. We are in submission to Him and are to do only what He commands us to do. Second, the church is called to submit to leaders God has placed in leadership. Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.” Third, the church is called to submit to one another. This is called mutual submission. Paul says in Ephesians 5:21, “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.” The “one another” in that verse is the church. This idea of submission is practiced when each member considers others more important than themselves (Phil. 2:3). The way the church can reflect Christ in this world is by living a life of submission in obedience to Christ.

Once we grasp the fact that, as a church, we are the people of God, both an encouragement and a challenge follow. The encouragement comes from knowing that we are God’s treasured possession, the people He has specially loved and called to Himself (Ex. 19:5; Rom. 1:6; 1 Pet. 2:9). This is not because of any goodness in us, but because of His immeasurable grace (Deut. 7:7–8; 2 Tim. 1:9). Further, it means that God is committed to being our God. He will be with us in the present and will one day bring us to live in perfect, face-to-face fellowship with Himself (Matt. 28:20; Heb. 13:5; Rev. 21:3–4; 22:4). However, there is a challenge that comes with being the people of God. The challenge is that as the people of God, we are called to obey God and reflect His character to the world around us (1 Pet. 2:9).

The Pillar and Support of Truth

If someone asked you, “Where can I find truth?”, what would you tell them? Every Christian ought to be able to say, “Come to my church and you will find the truth.” There are three reasons for this. First, every Christian has been given “the Spirit of truth.” Jesus said in John 14:16–17, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you

and will be in you.” Under the old covenant, the Holy Spirit was with believers in a general sense. However, under the new covenant all born again Christians have the Spirit of truth within them. This indwelling of the Holy Spirit took place when the church was born on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4). When the church gathers together to worship God, we come together with the Spirit of truth residing within us.

Second, the church has the Scriptures which are the truth. Jesus said in John 17:17, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.” The Bible that has been given to the church doesn’t just contain truth, it is truth. Every word that is given in the Bible is true. Proverbs 30:5 says, “Every word of God proves true; he is a shield to those who take refuge in him.” Because it is impossible for God to lie (Heb. 6:18), and the Bible is inspired (or “breathed out”) by God (2 Tim. 3:16), every word in the pages of Scripture is true. This means that everything that is done in the church is to be grounded in the Bible and, therefore, grounded in the truth. When the church gathers together, we worship in accordance with the truth and we study the truth so that we can go and live out the truth in our lives.

Third, the church has been commissioned to uphold the truth. Paul told Timothy in 1 Timothy 3:14–15, “I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.” The church of Ephesus, where Timothy was pastoring, would have understood the imagery of a pillar and buttress. In the city of Ephesus there was an enormous temple of Artemis. This temple had 127 pillars that stood about 57 feet tall. Each one of these pillars was used to uphold a massive, shining, marble roof. There was also a buttress or supporting foundation that was laid to give support to the pillars. Paul’s illustration would have been understood by Timothy and the church at Ephesus. Just as the foundation and pillars of the temple of Artemis was what upheld a false, pagan religious system in that day, it was the duty of the church to be the pillar and foundation of the truth. As one commentator states, “The church of God is no longer viewed as a company of separate individuals, but as one massive foundation-pillar, supporting and displaying the glories of redemption.”⁴ While the world around us is looking for the truth, the church is the people of God who uphold and display the truth that God has given.

As the people of God who have and uphold the truth of God’s Word, the church is called to live in obedience to Christ. It begins by understanding who we are to be as a church and then understand the responsibility that we have been given as God’s people.

Application

1. What is your view of the church? What have you learned that needs to change in your thinking?
2. Are you growing in your knowledge of the truth as a member of God’s church?
3. How are you living out the truth in your own life?

⁴ Ellicott’s Commentary for English Readers, *1 Timotht 3:15*, accessed 6/4/26, https://biblehub.com/1_timothy/3-15.htm.