



“The Nature of the Church”

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We use the word ‘church’ all the time. But do we really know what it means in the scriptures? We’ve had some studies recently pertaining to the church that Jesus built, and we studied the identifying characteristics of the church; the things that set apart the church that Jesus built from the so-called churches that men have since built. Our studies have brought us to some important questions: *What IS the church? What DID Jesus establish here on this earth? What IS Jesus the head over? What is it that Jesus Christ dwells within?* Today, we’ll be discussing the nature of the church to answer these questions. Let’s begin by looking back at a familiar passage.

Matthew 16:16-19 “And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”

Jesus said that He would build *His church*. What was He talking about? What did He build? Was He talking about a building? An organization? A group of people? A spiritual concept? And to what were the prophets referring when they pointed forward to the church that Jesus would build?

The scriptures were not originally penned in English. The New Testament scriptures were written in Greek and it is necessary for us to translate those Greek words into English so that we can understand the will of God. The English word *church* that is used to translate the Greek word *ecclesia* is really an unfortunate translation. The English word *church*, by definition, refers to *a public place where people meet for worship; a building, a chapel, a religious edifice*. So, it’s not surprising when people talk about *going to church* or when they pass by a particular building and say *there’s a church right there*. That’s a misnomer. The Bible doesn’t use the term that way.

The Greek word *ecclesia* means *called out or forth; a congregation or assembly that has been called out; a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place*. You can see it has nothing to do with a building, even though the church sometimes meets in a building. The building itself is not the church, and really has nothing to do with the church. The church is simply the congregation or assembly of God's people. That misunderstanding has spawned a lot of false ideas, false doctrines, false practices and false organizations in the name of Christianity today.

Ecclesia, which we translate as *church*, refers to only two general ideas in scripture; three if you break it down into more specific applications, which we'll get to in the course of our study.

1. The Church Universal. Meaning, all of those who have been called out of the world into a saving relationship with Christ Jesus. When used in this sense, it does not refer to an organization, but merely to an idea, a concept or a spiritual relationship. It is called *the body*, of which Christ is the head (**Colossians 1:18**), *the house of God* (**I Timothy 3:15, Ephesians 2:19**), *a temple or habitation of God* (**Ephesians 2:21-22, I Corinthians 3:16**). All of these refer to the universal number of baptized believers the world over. **Acts 2** explains to us how people are made part of that universal body, the universal church. The Bible says there that on the Day of Pentecost, the church of Jesus Christ became a visible reality here in this world. Peter preached the first gospel sermon, men believed it, repented of their sins, turned to Christ in obedience and were baptized for the remission of their sins, and upon that, were added to the church by the Lord.

Acts 2:38, 47 "Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost...And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved."

He certainly didn't add them to a denomination. There were no denominations. Denominations are contrary to anything that we read in the New Testament about the church. He didn't even add them to any tangible organization. Rather, they were called out of the kingdom of the world and translated into the kingdom of Christ.

Colossians 1:13 "Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son:"

It was a spiritual transaction, a spiritual change of relationship. So, when we say that we are members of the church of Christ, if we're using that terminology properly and scripturally, we are not referring to a denominational body. We're not speaking of some worldwide organization. The church of Christ is NOT a denomination, nor is it a worldwide organization with some type of headquarters or system of government over it.

The church of Christ, as the term is used universally, simply refers to those who have been baptized for the remission of their sins and thus, baptized *into Christ Jesus* and are in a saved relationship with Him. Too many people—even those who are members of the church—look at the church in this universal sense as something more than what it is. It is NOT an organization, nor is it a super-organization made up of smaller organizations. It is not even a collection of churches. That's how denominations are defined, but that is NOT

what the Lord's church is. Rather, the word *church* when used universally is merely the aggregate of all saved people in Christ. No more and no less.

Christ is the church's only ruler or head. There is no pope, no president, no collection of officers. Christ is its sole authority, and that authority is expressed in the scriptures, written by the inspired apostles and prophets of the first century. Christians and members of His church, no matter where they live in this world, are bound together by mutual faith and salvation in Christ Jesus, and nothing more.

Ephesians 2:20-21 “And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord:”

There are no headquarters for the universal church to answer to or be affiliated with. There is no work assigned to it, no officers appointed over it. No creed or charter to define or rule it, other than the scriptures. So, get that: the universal church describes our relationship simply as people of God.

Then, the word *church* is used in another sense. And in this sense, it refers to something visible. You see, the universal church is invisible. You can see an individual who may be a part of Christ's church, but so far as the universal church as a whole, you can't see it. It is a concept. Where the church becomes visible is on the local level.

2. The Church Local. This use of the word refers to those who have been called out of sin and are now in Christ, who are called out in a community together into a congregation of believers. It refers to the local body of believers. Each local congregation functions together as the visible and active body of Christ in that place, under the authority of Jesus Christ and His apostles.

I Corinthians 1:2 “Unto the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all that in every place call upon the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours:”

Here, Paul makes a distinction between the church that existed in the city of Corinth with believers in other places. We're not all just members of the church at large; individual Christians—those who have been baptized for the remission of their sins—then come together to work and worship in local congregations, such as existed at Corinth.

Paul wrote to the churches of Galatia. Jesus addressed the seven churches in the book of **Revelation**. All of these simply refer to local, independent churches or assemblies of believers. Here, the word doesn't describe our relationship to God so much as it describes our relationship to other saints or believers. A local church is a relationship of believers in a certain location, who band together to worship and cooperate together in the work of the Lord. It is the local church through which the work of God is carried out and through which the Lord operates in this world.

The Bible defines the characteristics of these local congregations, and these characteristics do not describe the universal body of Christ. Make note of them very briefly. They are the basis upon which churches not only visibly exist, but by which they scripturally operate.

- a. Each church came together in the first century for worship and edification. Gathering for worship was not a function of the universal body, but of the local body.

I Corinthians 14:23 “If therefore the whole church be come together into one place...”

Obviously, Paul isn't referring to every believer, from every age. He's talking about the whole church there at Corinth; all of the believers in Corinth came together as a church in one place.

Acts 20:6-7 “And we sailed away from Philippi after the days of unleavened bread, and came unto them to Troas in five days; where we abode seven days. And upon the first day of the week, when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul preached unto them, ready to depart on the morrow; and continued his speech until midnight.”
Hebrews 10:23-25 “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;) And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”

The Hebrew writer says that we are to assemble ourselves together. We're not to forsake that. We learn in **Acts 20** that the church at Troas came together to break bread and Paul preached to them. The assembly is something that takes place on the local level.

- b. Each church is to be governed by its own leaders.

Acts 14:23 “And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.”

So, every church had its own elders. Who did these elders serve? Who did they rule over? Peter gives us the answer.

I Peter 5:1-2 “The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof...”

Their authority extended no further than their own flock: the local congregation over which they were selected to serve as shepherds. That is very significant because the Bible does not allow for any type of a hierarchy of leadership or power that supersedes that within each autonomous local congregation. There was no pope in the early church; Jesus Christ was the head of the early church. His apostles whom He chose and who lived in the first century were the foundation upon which the church was built. But the church came together in a visible sense on the local level, and each local congregation had its own elders appointed to rule over it.

- c. Each church collects and keeps its own funds for the help of needy Christians and for evangelism according to **I Corinthians 16:1-2**. The apostle Paul says there that the church at Corinth was to take up a collection, just like he had ordered the churches at Galatia to do amongst themselves. So, every church manages its own treasury to carry out its own work.
- d. The local church sends out preachers to evangelize (**Acts 11:22, Acts 13:1-3**). There is no worldwide missionary board to send out preachers, rather the local church takes care of that. It was Antioch that sent Paul out on his missionary journey.
- e. Each church is in control of its own fellowship. Paul recommended Phoebe for the fellowship of the church at Rome (**Romans 16:1-2**). Paul, already a Christian, had to be received into the fellowship of the Jerusalem church when he went there the first time. Diotrophes, you may recall, wrongly cast people out of the church in **III John**. He wasn't casting people out of the universal church—only God can do that. He was denying fellowship to people in the local congregation where he was. Fellowship is a local matter. There's no governing board over some super-church organization to determine the fellowship of this believer or that believer. Rather, each church is in charge of administering its own discipline and receiving people into its fellowship.
- f. Each church disciplines its own members (**I Corinthians 5:1-13**). Paul wrote to Corinth that the man who was living in sin there was to be delivered over to Satan when the church there came together. That meant that they were to withdraw from him and cut him off from that local body, in order that he might be brought to repentance and that the church might be protected from the influence of his immorality.
- g. No church is subordinate to another. Each congregation is equal to the next. There is no church that governs over another. Paul refers to equality among the churches in **II Corinthians 8:14**.

Every church is autonomous and self-governing. There is no organization any larger than the local church. Someone might say, *that's the way we see it today, isn't it? Aren't denominations just a part of the universal church?* But ARE denominations that sprang up during the Reformation the same thing as individual congregations that were spread out over the world in the first century? Is that really a parallel? Look at what Paul said.

I Corinthians 4:17 “For this cause have I sent unto you Timotheus, who is my beloved son, and faithful in the Lord, who shall bring you into remembrance of my ways which be in Christ, as I teach every where in every church.”

There was no such thing in the first century as different churches, subscribing to different doctrines, wearing different names, embracing different forms of government, adhering to various and conflicting teachings. What Paul taught in one church, he taught in every church.

I Corinthians 11:14-16 “Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him? But if a woman have long hair, it is a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering (or a veil). But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.”

Paul is giving instructions to the church concerning a woman’s covering, given to her by God; that is, her long hair. Scholars and commentators agree that what Paul is saying in **verse 16** is that this was the practice and belief of the churches throughout the world. And if Corinth wanted to make an issue of this, then they were departing from the common custom of the other churches.

I Corinthians 14:36-37 “What? came the word of God out from you? or came it unto you only? If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.”

You see, Corinth was under the same authority that every other church was under, and that was the authority of the apostle Paul and the other apostles and prophets of the first century. They were to be under the authority of the word of God, just like every other church then and every other church today. And, friend, if we’re ALL under the authority of the word of God, we’re going to be the same. We’re going to believe, preach and practice the same things because the Bible doesn’t teach conflicting doctrines.

There is a clear picture that is set forth in the scriptures: each church was planted in its own locality as a result of the gospel being preached and obeyed in that place. The church was formed to tend to its own work of preaching the gospel to those around it, edifying those within it, disciplining its own members, caring for its own needy and overseen by its own elders. There was nothing larger than the individual local church and the only thing smaller than the universal church was a local, autonomous congregation that the apostle Paul referred to here:

Romans 16:16 “...The churches of Christ salute you.”

The church of Christ is not a denomination. Churches of Christ are not a part of a denomination. They are local assemblies of believers who are guided by the scriptures only, who come together to carry out the work of the Lord and the worship of God just as the Bible teaches. Thus, we seek to do only as the Bible says—not adding to, not taking from—but simply to follow a *thus saith the Lord* in the work, the worship, the government, the organization, and the name of the Lord’s church.

That’s a wonderful plea. I hope today that you will strike hands and hearts with us on that great plea of the restoration of pure New Testament Christianity. There certainly are a number of misconceptions about what the church is, which leads to a number of false doctrines and false practices. I hope you have profited from our study about the nature of the church.

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