

## What is the Church?

### What the Church is not

1. A religious building (e.g. “where is your church?”)
2. A religious club (e.g. “what church do you go to?”)
3. A religious event (e.g. “what time do you do church?”)

### What the Church is

The Greek word translated by most English Bibles as “church” is ἐκκλησία (*ekklēsia*). Traditionally, the word is thought to be the combination of the preposition ἐκ (*ek*), “out of,” and the noun κλήσις (*klēsis*), “calling,” forming the idea of the church being God’s “called out” ones.

Whether or not this is legitimate, the Greek word used in the NT translates the OT noun קָהָל (*qahal*), which almost always means “[Yahweh’s] gathered assembly.”

- This certainly is the meaning of the word in the new covenant, where we see Christ’s “called out ones” gathering together for the purpose of worship and fellowship.

This idea of “gathering together” as believers is repeatedly exemplified in the book of Acts<sup>1</sup> and taught in the NT epistles.<sup>2</sup> Literally, the believers would “synagogue,”<sup>3</sup> that is, they would gather together as a church.

The pattern set out in the book of Acts shows that the purpose of such meeting together as believers was to edify one another in word and deed:

- Acts 2:42 – “And they<sup>4</sup> were continually<sup>5</sup> devoting themselves to the apostles’ teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.”

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<sup>1</sup> E.g. Acts 4:31; 12:12; 14:27; 15:30; 20:7, 8.

<sup>2</sup> This is used in various ways in most of the introductions to Paul’s letters, and is seen explicitly in places like Hebrews 10:24-25. See also Paul’s repeated use of the phrase “when you come together as a church” in 1 Corinthians 11:17-35.

<sup>3</sup> The Greek verb is συνάγω (*synagōgō*), and is where the Jews got the name of “synagogue” for their meeting place for worship of God through the reading, teaching, and singing of Scripture together.

We will cover these four aspects of “churching” together in a later study. But for now, it is worth asking, “Are these the primary reasons I come to church?”

- Am I eager to receive with meekness the implanted Word that expounds the teaching/doctrine of the apostolic gospel?
- Do I view my brothers and sisters in Christ as “partners”<sup>6</sup> in Christ and for the gospel?
- Do I gather in anticipation of regularly partaking the Lord’s Supper<sup>7</sup> in order to be strengthened together with my fellow partners in the gospel?
- Do I consider prayer as an essential component of gathering as believers?

Just as the OT covenant people of God (“Israel”) was commanded to gather together in Yahweh’s name for worship and instruction, so we see this pattern repeated for the NT covenant people of God (“the church”), who now are to obediently gather together in the Name of Christ to worship Him and be instructed in His gospel.<sup>8</sup>

- As Dever notes, “the shape of the visible church today bears a clear continuity – though not identity – with the visible people of God in the Old Testament.”<sup>9</sup>

As we will see in later studies, Christ’s people no longer gather *at* the Temple of God, but *are* the temple of God when they gather together.

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<sup>4</sup> The referent is clearly the believers of v. 41, that is, those who “received [Peter’s] word [i.e. gospel message]” and “were baptized.”

<sup>5</sup> The ESV (“they devoted”) unfortunately fails to pick up the emphatic continuous sense of the verb tense here. The idea is that this was regularly happening (see v. 46: “day by day”).

<sup>6</sup> The Greek word used here is *κοινωνία* (*koinonia*), and was often used in the secular business world for “partners” in a venture who joined together and worked together for the same purpose and goal. This sense is heightened and intensified in the NT, where believers are seen as “partners” in the gospel of Christ and its advance in the world (e.g. see Phil. 1:7 [the ESV translates the word here as “partakers”]).

<sup>7</sup> Most English translations simply have “the breaking of bread.” Though this is literally what the Greek means, most Bible commentators (e.g. Lukan expert Darrell Bock) say that this carries the idea of eating a meal together as believers, culminating in the partaking of Communion together (e.g. 1 Cor. 11:17-34). The NLT translates the phrase, “and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper),” and seems to catch what Luke is ultimately saying here.

<sup>8</sup> Who, as we saw in our study on the Trinity is co-equal to the Father and the Holy Spirit, and is thus “as Yahweh” [that is, “LORD”] as the Father is (cf. John 1:1).

<sup>9</sup> Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing, 2012), 4.

- Matt. 18:20 – “For where two or three are gathered in My name, there I am among them.”<sup>10</sup>
- 1 Cor. 3:16 – “Do you<sup>11</sup> not know that you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you?”
- Eph. 2:21-22 – “In [Christ] the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”<sup>12</sup>
- 1 Pet. 2:4 – “As you come to Him [Christ], a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house.”

The Bible unambiguously and unashamedly teaches that God’s eternal plan has always been to display His glory “not just through individuals, but through a corporate body.”<sup>13</sup>

- That is, just as Yahweh found His own assembly – Israel – at Sinai in the old covenant, so now has He founded His own assembly – the church – in Christ in the new covenant.

Again, Dever is helpful:

According to Matthew’s gospel, Jesus first names His new [covenant] people as “My church” (16:18). As Adam named his bride, so Christ names His church.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This is a tricky verse that is often misinterpreted to mean that Christians don’t need to “do” or “go to” church. That is, two Christians meeting together for coffee or going for a hike on Sunday is just as much “doing church” as meeting together in a ‘formal’ building where a ‘paid’ pastor preaches a sermon, etc. However, the context of Matthew 18 clearly necessitates this ‘formal’ church they are rejecting. The context is dealing with an unrepentant sinner who Jesus says needs to be “put out” of the *ekklēsia* by the *ekklēsia*. Only “the congregation/assembly” has the authority (“the keys of the kingdom”) to declare that this unrepentant sinner is still “bound” in their sins.

<sup>11</sup> The “you” is plural, and the context clearly shows that Paul is addressing not individuals here, but the church.

<sup>12</sup> Though it is true that this verse refers to Christ’s “universal” church, the context is clearly addressing the Gentile believers in Ephesus, whom Paul is saying are just as much a part of God’s one “temple” as are the believing Jews, now that Christ has come (cf. 1:11-14 and 3:6).

<sup>13</sup> Dever, *The Church*, *ibid*.

## Conclusion

In summary, then, we may define the church as:

*The assembly of Christ's people who regularly and intentionally gather to worship Him and serve one another as they learn the Bible together, sing [psalms and hymns and spiritual songs] together, pray together, and celebrate the Lord's Table together.*

Of course, this begs the question, “who are Christ’s people?”

We will deal with – and hopefully answer [biblically] – that very question as we gather together for our next study.

## Application Questions

1. If someone asked you why you regularly attend your church, how would you answer them (in light of this study)?
2. If someone told you that it’s totally fine for a Christian to intentionally not attend a local church, what would you say?
3. Is there a difference between “going to church” and “being the church”? Why and how is the former an inadequate expression of the NT teaching?
4. Is “assembling” and “partnering” together with the Lord’s people – especially on the Lord’s Day (Sunday) – a priority in my life? Do I cancel other events for gathering with Christ’s people, or do I cancel gathering with Christ’s people for other events?<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Dever, *The Church*, 8.

<sup>15</sup> Please note, I am not legalistically trying to guilt Christians into attending every single gathering that the church provides. I am, however, trying to encourage a more other-focused and sacrificial mindset that soars above checking off the ‘weekly minimum’ that status-quo Christianity in the West seems to be totally comfortable with.