

Discipleship 101

a beginner's guide to Christianity

Chapter 22

What is the church?

The Bible says that people who have faith in Christ become part of the “church.” What is the church? How is it organized? What is its purpose?

Jesus is building his church

Jesus said, “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18). The church is important to him—he loved it so much that he gave his life for it (Ephesians 5:25). If we have the mind of Christ, we will love the church, too, and give ourselves to it.

The Greek word for “church” is *ekklesia*, which means an assembly. In Acts 19:39, 41, it is used for a large group of townspeople. But among Christians, the word *ekklesia* came to have a special meaning: all who believe in Jesus Christ.

For example, the first time that Luke uses the word, he writes, “great fear seized the whole church” (Acts 5:11). He does not have to explain what the word meant, for his readers were already familiar with it. It meant all Christians, not just those who happened to be there on that particular occasion. “The church” means all disciples of Christ. It refers to people, not to a building.

Each local group of believers is a church. Paul wrote to “the church of God in Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:2); he referred to “all the churches of Christ” (Romans 16:16) and the “church of the Laodiceans” (Colossians 4:16). But he could also use the word *church* to refer to all believers everywhere: “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (Ephesians 5:25).

The church exists in several levels. At one level is the universal church, which includes everyone worldwide who accepts Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Local churches are a different level,

including people who regularly meet together. Denominations are an intermediate level, containing groups of congregations that work more closely together because of shared history and beliefs.

Local congregations sometimes include unbelievers—family members who have not accepted the gospel, yet nevertheless meet regularly with believers. Local congregations may also include people who consider themselves to be Christians, but may not be. Experience shows that some of these will later admit that they were not really believers.

Why we need the church

Many people claim to believe in Jesus Christ but do not want to attend any of his churches. The New Testament shows that the normal pattern is for believers to meet together (Hebrews 10:25).

Paul repeatedly exhorts Christians to do different things to “one another” (Romans 12:10; 15:7; 1 Corinthians 12:25; Galatians 5:13; Ephesians 4:32; Philippians 2:3; Colossians 3:13; 1 Thessalonians 5:13). It is difficult for people to obey these commands if they do not meet with other believers.

A local congregation can give us a sense of belonging, of being involved with other believers. It can give us some spiritual safety, so that we are not blown around by strange ideas. A congregation can give us friendship, fellowship and encouragement. It can teach us things we would never learn on our own. A congregation can help train our children, help us work together for more effective ministry and give us opportunities to serve that help us grow in ways we did not expect. In general, the value that we get out of a local congregation is in proportion

to the amount of involvement we give to it.

But perhaps the most important reason for each believer to participate in a local congregation is that members need each other. God has given different abilities to different believers, and he wants us to work together “for the common good” (1 Corinthians 12:4-7). If only part of the work force shows up, it is no surprise that the congregation is not able to do as much as we would like, or to be as healthy as we would like. Unfortunately, some people find it easier to criticize than to help.

Our time, our abilities, our resources are needed to fulfill the work and mission of the church. The commitment of mission-focused people is essential in order for the church to effectively reflect Jesus and his love to the world. Jesus said to pray for laborers (Matthew 9:38). He wants each of us to be working, not sitting on the sidelines.

Individuals who try to be Christian without the church fail to use their strengths to help the people the Bible says we should be helping. The church is a mutual-aid society, and we help each other, knowing that the day may come (and in fact is already here) that we will need to be helped.

Descriptions of the church

The church is described in several ways: the people of God, the family of God, the bride of Christ. We are a building, a temple and a body. Jesus described us as sheep, a field of grain and a vineyard. Each analogy describes a different aspect of the church.

Many of Jesus’ parables of the kingdom describe the church, too. Like a mustard seed, the church started small and yet has grown quite large (Matthew 13:31-32). The church is like a field in which weeds are scattered among the wheat (verses 24-30). It is like a fishnet that catches bad fish as well as good (verses 47-50). The church is like a vineyard in which some people work a long time and others only a short time (Matthew 20:1-16). The church is like servants who were given money to invest for the master, and some produce more fruit than others (Matthew 25:14-30).

Jesus described himself as a shepherd, and his disciples as sheep (Matthew 26:31); his mission was to seek lost sheep (Matthew 18:11-14). He

described his people as sheep that must be fed and cared for (John 21:15-17). Paul and Peter used the same analogy, saying that church leaders should be shepherds of the flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2).

“You are...God’s building,” Paul says (1 Corinthians 3:9). The foundation is Jesus Christ (verse 11), and people are the building built on it. Peter said that we are all “living stones...being built into a spiritual house” (1 Peter 2:5). As we are built together, we “become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit” (Ephesians 2:22). We are the temple of God, the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:17; 6:19). Although God may be worshiped in any place, the church has worship as one of its purposes.

We are “the people of God,” 1 Peter 2:10 tells us. We are what the people of Israel were supposed to be: “a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God” (verse 9; see Exodus 19:6). We belong to God, because Christ purchased us with his blood (Revelation 5:9). We are his children, and his family (Ephesians 3:15). As his people, we are given a great inheritance, and in response we are to try to please him and bring praise to his name.

Scripture also calls us the bride of Christ—a phrase that suggests his love for us, and a tremendous change within ourselves, that we might have such a close relationship with the Son of God. In some of his parables, people are invited to attend the wedding banquet, but in this analogy, we are invited to be the bride.

“Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready” (Revelation 19:7). How do we become ready for this? It is a gift: “Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear” (verse 8). Christ cleanses us “by the washing with water through the word” (Ephesians 5:26). He presents the church to himself, having made her radiant, spotless, holy and righteous (verse 27). He is working in us.

Working together

The picture of the church that best illustrates the way that members relate to one another is that of the body. “You are the body of Christ,” Paul says,

“and each one of you is a part of it” (1 Corinthians 12:27). Jesus Christ “is the head of the body, the church” (Colossians 1:18), and we are all members of the body. If we are united to Christ, we are united to one another, too, and we have responsibilities to one another.

No one can say, “I don’t need you” (1 Corinthians 12:21), and no one can say, “I don’t belong in the church” (verse 18). God distributes our abilities so that we work together for the common good, helping one another and being *helped* by working together. “There should be no division in the body” (verse 25). Paul frequently warned against the sin of divisiveness, even saying that a person who causes division should be put out of the church (Romans 16:17; Titus 3:10). Christ causes the church to grow “as each part does its work”—as the various members cooperate (Ephesians 4:16).

Unfortunately, the Christian world is divided into denominations that sometimes squabble with one another. The church is not yet perfect, since none of its members is perfect. Nevertheless, Christ wants the church to be united (John 17:21). This does not require a merger of organizations, but it does suggest a common purpose.

True unity can be found only as we draw closer to Christ, preach his gospel, and live as he would. The goal is to promote him, not ourselves. The existence of different denominations has a side benefit, however: Through diverse approaches, more people are reached with the message of Christ in a way they understand.

Organization

The Christian world has three basic approaches to church organization and leadership: hierarchy, democracy and representative. These are called episcopal, congregational and presbyterian.

Variations exist within each type, but in general, the episcopal model means that a denominational officer has the power to set policy and ordain pastors. In the congregational model, church members choose their policies and their pastors. In a presbyterian system, power is divided between the denomination and the congregations. Elders are elected and given power to govern.

The New Testament does not require any particular church structure. It talks about overseers (bishops), elders and shepherds (pastors) as if these were different words for the same type of church leader. Peter told the elders to be shepherds and overseers (1 Peter 5:1-2). Similarly, Paul told a group of elders that they were overseers and shepherds (Acts 20:17, 28).

The Jerusalem church was led by a group of elders; the church in Philippi was led by several overseers (Acts 15:2-6; Philippians 1:1). Paul told Titus to ordain elders, wrote one verse about elders and then several about overseers, as if these were synonymous terms for church leaders (Titus 1:5-9). In the book of Hebrews, the leaders are simply called “leaders” (Hebrews 13:7).

Some church leaders were also called “teachers” (1 Corinthians 12:29; James 3:1). The grammar of Ephesians 4:11 implies that pastors and teachers were in the same category. One of the primary functions of a church leader is teaching—one of the qualifications for leadership is that the person must be “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2).

One thing is consistent in this: Certain people were designated as leaders. The local churches had some organization, though the exact title didn’t seem to matter much.

Members were exhorted to respect and obey these leaders (1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Timothy 5:17; Hebrews 13:17). If the leader commands something wrong, members should not obey, but for the most part, members are to support their leaders.

What do leaders do? They “direct the affairs of the church” (1 Timothy 5:17). They shepherd the flock, leading by example and by teaching. They watch over the church (Acts 20:28). They should not lord it over others, but serve them (1 Peter 5:2-3). They are to “prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (Ephesians 4:12).

How are leaders chosen? We are told in only a few cases: Paul appointed elders (Acts 14:23), implied that Timothy would choose overseers (1 Timothy 3:1-7), and authorized Titus to appoint elders (Titus 1:5). At least in these cases, there was a hierarchy. We do not find any examples of church members choosing their own elders.

Deacons

However, in Acts 6:1-6 we see members choosing some leaders to help distribute food to the needy, and the apostles then appointed them for this work. In that way the apostles could concentrate on spiritual matters, and the physical needs could also be taken care of (verse 2). This distinction between spiritual leadership and physical leadership is also seen in 1 Peter 4:11-12.

Leaders who serve in manual work are often called deacons, from the Greek word *diakoneo*, which means to serve. Although all members and leaders are to serve, some are specifically appointed for service roles. At least one woman is called a deacon (Romans 16:1). Paul gave Timothy a list of traits needed in a deacon (1 Timothy 3:8-12), but he did not specify what they did. Consequently different denominations assign them different roles, ranging from custodial work to financial management.

The important thing in leadership is not what people are called, how they are structured or how they are appointed. The important thing is the purpose of leadership: to help God's people grow in maturity we become more like Christ (Ephesians 4:13).

Purposes of the church

Christ has built his church, given his people gifts and leadership, and he has given us work to do. What are the purposes of the church?

A major purpose of the church is worship. God has called us that we “may declare the praises of him” who called us “out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). God seeks people who will worship him (John 4:23), who will love him above everything else (Matthew 4:10). Everything we do, whether as individuals or as a congregation, should be for his glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). We are called to “continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise” (Hebrews 13:15).

We are commanded, “Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs” (Ephesians

5:19). When we gather, we sing praises to God, we pray to him and we listen to his word. These are forms of worship. So is the Lord's Supper, so is baptism and so is obedience.

Teaching is another purpose of the church. It is at the heart of the Great Commission: “teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:20). Church leaders should teach, and members should teach one another (Colossians 3:16). We should encourage one another (1 Corinthians 14:31; 1 Thessalonians 5:11; Hebrews 10:25). Small groups provide an excellent setting for this mutual ministry.

If we want to be spiritual, Paul says, we should want to “build up the church” (1 Corinthians 14:12). The goal is to edify, strengthen, encourage and comfort (verse 3). The entire meeting should “be done for the strengthening of the church” (verse 26). We are to be disciples, people who learn and apply the word of God. The early church was praised because they “devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer” (Acts 2:42).

Ministry is a third major purpose of the church. Paul writes, “As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers” (Galatians 6:10). Our first duty is to our family, and then to the church and then to the world around us. The second-greatest commandment is to love our neighbors (Matthew 22:39).

This world has many physical needs, and we should not ignore them. But the greatest need is the gospel, and we should not ignore that, either. As part of our ministry to the world, the church is to preach the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ. No other organization will do this work—it is the mission of the church. Every worker is needed—some on the front lines, and some in support. Some will plant, some will nurture and some will harvest, and as we work together, Christ will cause the church to grow (Ephesians 4:16).

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