

What Is the Church?



“The church is not a democracy in which we have chosen God, but a theocracy in which He has chosen us.”

JOHN BLANCHARD

REFLECTION and **PREPARATION**—Read and meditate on Augustus Toplady’s, *A Debtor to Mercy Alone*:

A debtor to mercy alone, of covenant mercy I sing;
Nor fear, with Thy righteousness on, my person and off’ring to bring.
The terrors of law and of God with me can have nothing to do;
My Savior’s obedience and blood hide all my transgressions from view.

The work which His goodness began, the arm of His strength will complete;
His promise is Yea and Amen, and never was forfeited yet.
Things future, nor things that are now, nor all things below or above,
Can make Him His purpose forgo, or sever my soul from His love.

My name from the palms of His hands, eternity will not erase;
Impressed on His heart it remains, in marks of indelible grace.
Yes, I to the end shall endure, as sure as the earnest is giv’n;
More happy, but not more secure, the glorified spirits in Heav’n.

LESSON AIM:

- To define three clear ways the Scripture presents the church.

DISCUSSION: Are the following statements true or false? (circle one)

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| • God has more than one church. | T | F |
| • True Christians can be a part of a false church. | T | F |
| • A false church can produce true Christians. | T | F |

Three Presentations of the Church

Scripture presents the church as *the people of God, the Messianic community, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.*

A. The people of God

1. What terms does the Apostle Peter apply to the New Testament church that are used in the Old Testament for the people of God? (Underline them.)

1 Peter 2:9—But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR God's OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;

- *Chosen race*—(*Eklektos*) refers to those selected as the object of divine favor and for His own very specific purpose. (*Deut.10:15; Ps.33:12; John.15:16*)
 - *A royal priesthood*— (*basileion hierateuma*) refers to and originates from Exodus 19 and describes those of kingly ancestry who are designated to now offer up spiritual sacrifices. (*Is.61:6-7*)
 - *A holy nation*—refers to a covenant community set apart for God's special purposes. (*Deut.7:6*)
2. What term does Jesus use to describe His people according to Matthew 16:18?

The biblical word "church" (Heb. *qahal*, Gk. *ekklesia*) means *assembly* or *called out ones*. It derives its name from the covenant-making assembly at Mount Sinai (*Deut.9:10; 10:4*). Israel later assembled before God for covenant renewal and at the feasts (*Deut.29:1; Josh.8:35; Neh.5:13; Lev.23*).

3. Read Acts 1:1-8. Here in the descriptive account of the early church, another assembly is being created, gathered, empowered, and sent out.
 - By whom? (*vv.3-4, 8a*)
 - For what? (*vv.8b, 12-16*)

Sidenote: In the Jewish world, 120 was the number in which a Jewish community could constitute its own council and government.

4. As Christians, with whom do we assemble to worship and where (spiritually)? Read Hebrews 12:18-24.

J.I. Packer notes,

“Essentially, the church is, was, and always will be a single worshipping community, permanently gathered in the true sanctuary which is the heavenly Jerusalem, the place of God’s presence. Here all who are alive in Christ, the physically living with the physically dead (the church militant with the church triumphant) worship continually.”
(Cf. Phil.3:3) ⁵

5. The church is not only *the people of God*, but we are also *the dwelling of God*. The symbolism of *God’s dwelling* among His people in the tabernacle is fulfilled in two ways:

First, by Jesus in the tabernacle of His flesh.

- **John 1:14**—And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.
- **John 2:19-21**—Jesus answered them, “Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.”
²⁰The Jews then said, “It took forty-six years to build this temple, and will You raise it up in three days?” ²¹But He was speaking of the temple of His body.

Second, by the Spirit—in the church. The church, like the Christian, is a temple of God.

- **1 Corinthians 3:16-17**—Do you not know that you are a temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you? ¹⁷If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are.
- **1 Corinthians 6:19**—Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?
- **2 Corinthians 6:16**— Or what agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; just as God said, “I WILL DWELL IN THEM AND WALK AMONG THEM; AND I WILL BE THEIR GOD, AND THEY SHALL BE MY PEOPLE.”

Summary: There is a continuity and discontinuity between Israel and the church. The continuity is that we were both *chosen of God* and described as *the people of God* with the same terms. The discontinuity is that the church is under a better New Covenant. The Spirit is poured out on *each Christian* so that *fellowship with Christ* (1 John 3:1), *ministry from Christ* (John 12:32; 14:18; Eph.2:17), and *foretastes of heaven* (2 Cor.1:22; Eph.1:14) become realities of the church’s experience.

Practically applied: What does this mean for you if you are a Christian? How does this apply to your worship? Your work? Your relationships?

⁵ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology*, p.201

B. The Messianic community

When Jesus came into the world, one of His express purposes was to *call* or *gather* His people by proclaiming the coming of God's saving kingdom in His own presence (*Luke 2:11; 4:21; 11:20; 12:32*) and triumph over sin and Satan by His crucifixion and resurrection.

1. Read Matthew 16:13-18. What is the "rock" upon which Jesus said, "I will build My church."?
2. Read the following verses and identify what Christ does to build His assembly as the new people of God.
 - a. John 14:16-18, Cf. Rom.8:9 He gives His Spirit who gives life.
 - b. John 14:26; 16:13-14 He gives His Word (truth).
 - c. Matt.28:19-20 He sends His disciples to gather the nations.
3. According to Ephesians 1:22-23, what is the church described as?
4. According to verse 22, why are we described in this way? (*Cf. Col.2:10*)
5. According to Ephesians 5:23, what metaphor is Christ's union with His body likened to?

Summary: R.B. Kuiper sums up this section for us clearly when he wrote, "No aspect of Christ's relationship to the church looms larger in Holy Writ than the fact that he is its head...the church was originated not only by Christ, but also from him, and cannot continue to exist for even a moment apart from Him."⁶

Practically applied: Complete this sentence: Since Jesus is the Head of the Church, what this means FOR me is...

C. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit

1. According to John 14:16-18 and Acts 1:4, what does the coming of the Holy Spirit fulfill?
2. Read the following Scriptures and identify the role the Holy Spirit plays in the life of the church.
 - a. John 16:12-14—As the Spirit of truth, He completes the revelation of Scripture and illuminates the church.
 - b. Acts 5:32; 13:2—As the Spirit of witness, He leads the church in its mission.

⁶ R.B. Kuiper, *The Complete Gathered Gold*, p.88

- c. Romans 8:2; 2 Corinthians 3:17—As the Spirit of life, He liberates the church from sin, death, and the condemnation of the law.
- d. Galatians 5:16-23—As the Spirit of Christ, He creates a holy fellowship in the bonds of love.
- e. Romans 8:14-17—As the Spirit of adoption, He provides a foretaste of glory and fortifies the church for suffering.
- f. 1 Corinthians 12:4-11—As the Spirit of grace, He determines gifts which equip the church to praise God, nurture the saints, and witness to the world.

Summary: The Holy Spirit *inhabits* the church in *divine Lordship*. In other words, it is the Spirit who *enthrones Christ as Lord in our hearts*. In addition to this, the Holy Spirit *completes* Scripture, *illuminates* the church, *leads* the church in its mission, *liberates* the church from sin, death, and condemnation of the law, *creates* a holy fellowship in love, *provides* a foretaste of glory, *fortifies* the church for suffering, and *equips* the church to praise God, *nurture* the saints, and *witness* to the world.

Practically applied: What does this mean for us? Complete this sentence: The Holy Spirit eliminates my excuse for...

CLARIFYING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH

There are many organizations that have falsely claimed to be the church and other churches that have become apostate (fallen away from the cardinal doctrines of the faith). How do we distinguish the true church that Jesus builds?

First, we must understand that there are two ASPECTS of the true church.

1. There is the church INVISIBLE (as God sees it—universal). This is composed of all whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.
 - **Revelation 3:5**—He who overcomes will thus be clothed in white garments; and I will not erase his name from the book of life, and I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.
 - **Revelation 21:27**—and nothing unclean, and no one who practices abomination and lying, shall ever come into it, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life.
2. There is the church VISIBLE (as we see it—local). This is a family of believers committed to doctrine, duty, and discipline under the care of pastors, elders, and deacons. However, the church visible must not be equated with salvation. In other words, not all who are a part of the visible church are a part of the invisible church (*Cf. Matt. 13:24-30*).
 - **Acts 2:42-47**— They were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.⁴³ Everyone kept feeling a sense of awe; and many wonders and signs were taking place through the apostles. ⁴⁴ And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were

sharing them with all, as anyone might have need. ⁴⁶ Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved.

When the Word of God is preached with apostolic authority and clear exposition, you will see...

- Energized fellowship
- Elevated worship
- Empowered prayers
- Enriched service
- Expanded joy
- Enflamed evangelism

Second, we must understand that there are certain ATTRIBUTES of the church.

1. The church is built by Jesus upon the prophetic witness of the Old Testament and the foundational apostolic teaching of New Testament.
 - **Ephesians 2:19-20**— So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God's household, ²⁰ having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner *stone*,
2. The church is defined by Scriptural unity not denominational division.
 - **Ephesians 4:4-6**— *There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.*

During the time of the Protestant Reformation (1500's), the reformers (*Wycliffe, Hus, Luther, Calvin, Knox, Farel, Beza*) could not find outward unity with the papacy and its claim to apostolic succession. They concluded that unity must always be drawn from the teaching of the apostles bearing these three marks:

- The pure preaching of *the Word of God*
- The proper celebration of *the sacraments* (baptism and the Lord's Supper)
- The faithful exercise of *church discipline*

Practically applied: Are you a part of the INVISIBLE church? How do you know if your name is written in the Lamb's book of life? Read 1 John 3:14-24. List the characteristics that the Apostle John gives of one who has assurance.

Are you a part of the VISIBLE church? Are you committed to participating in its ministries, ordinances, and support?

REVIEW:

What is the church?

- The people of God
- The Messianic community
- The fellowship of the Spirit

How do we define the church? There are two aspects:

1. Invisible—as God sees it.
2. Visible—as man sees it.

There are several attributes:

1. It is built by Jesus on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.
2. It is built on Scriptural unity.
3. It displays the pure preaching of the Word of God.
4. It practices the proper celebration of the sacraments (baptism and the Lord's Supper).
5. It practices the faithful exercise of church discipline.

CONCLUSION and APPLICATION

In describing the church, the Apostle John breaks out in praise in Revelation 1:5b-6,

"To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood—and He has made us to be a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him be glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen."

Every believer is designated to be a priest in His kingdom. Do you see yourself in this way? Why or why not?

As a believer-priest in the kingdom of Christ, what should be your mindset and attitude as you gather with the saints?



HART-TO-HEART

Jody Hart, Editor and Director Mountaintop Resources

This Body

This is my body; it was given to me,
Created, invisible, where no one could see.
Carefully crafted by glorious Hands.
In the dark of a womb,
An untouchable land.

This is my spirit; it was given to me,
Re-created, transformed, for the whole world to see.
Lovingly converted by the merciful One.
The price, unimaginable:
His only dear Son.

This is Your body; it was purchased for You,
The One who created and formed me anew.
But wait, there are more, more than just me!
Brothers and sisters!
A big family!

This is Your body; You are the head.
"My Spirit, I leave you," is what You said.
Help us to treasure this body, so dear.
And may You, Lord Jesus, be our ultimate fear.

This is my body; it was given to me,
One day to be glorified for all of heaven to see.
We will lay our crowns at the feet of the Son,
Transformation over, the work will be DONE!

ANSWER KEY:

DISCUSSION

- **False**
- **Perhaps**—The Gospel may have been heard from other sources and true life granted to God's elect, but they may be a part of a false church. In such cases, God's sheep will be malnourished and miserable. Eventually, they will find a place where they can be fed. (*John 10:27*)
- **False**—A false church has a false Gospel and a false Gospel cannot produce true Christians.

A. The people of God

1. A chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession
2. A heavenly assembly
3.
By whom? Christ
For what? To be witnesses of Him and to constitute its own government
4. With angels and believers who have gone to heaven in the heavenly Jerusalem

B. The Messianic community

1. Christ Himself
3. The body of Christ (a body whose head is Christ)
4. We are united to Him as a body is to a head
5. The husband as head of the wife

C. The fellowship of the Holy Spirit

1. The promise of the Father and of Christ

CLARIFYING OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE CHURCH

Practically applied: love of the brethren, keeps the Lord's commandments

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