

The Church of Jesus Christ

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The Church is the fundamental reality of the Christian faith. Its importance is hard to overstate, and it reminds us that the Christian life is not a solitary one. The New Testament teaches that Christ bought the Church, Christ loves the Church, Christ nourishes the Church, and He cherishes the Church (**Ephesians 5:23-29**). Building that Church is Christ's principal work in this age. It is the only institution that Jesus Christ Himself established. "One of the most wholesome provisions which God ever made for the welfare of His people was to call into being an organization to serve as the spiritual home for them while on earth" (Daniel Kauffman, *Doctrines of the Bible*, p. 162).

God has always had a people in special relationship to Himself. It was not always the Church as we know it today. God bound Himself into covenant with people throughout history. He made a covenant with Adam in **Genesis 3:21-24**. He made a covenant with Noah and all mankind (**Genesis 9:1-17**). God called Abraham from a pagan background to establish a covenant to show Abraham a new, Promised Land (**Genesis 12:1-3**). He set out a covenant with Moses and Israel after the Exodus, and the Israelites became known as the Chosen People (**Exodus 19:5-6**). God made a covenant with David and his descendants, that they should remain on the throne of Israel forever (**2 Samuel 7:5-16**).

What is the Church? Many definitions could be given. Some may consider the Church to be a denomination—such as the Church of the Brethren. Others may consider the Church to be that universal association of Christians or the complete Body of Christ (**1 Corinthians 15:9, Galatians 1:2, 13**). Still others may consider the Church to be the local body, according to **Colossians 4:16; Philippians 4:15; and 1 Corinthians 1:2**. Certainly there is a sense in which all those things are true. Millard Erickson writes, "The church is the whole body of those who through Christ's death have been savingly reconciled to God and have received new life" (*Christian Theology* [1st Edition], p. 1034) For the purposes of this article, we'll consider the Church to be a called-together body of growing believers in Jesus Christ, which has Christ as its Foundation and Head, and

which is organized for worship, edification, and evangelism. For the most part, references to the “Church” are to the local body of Christians that worship and serve God together.

The Church is Called-Together

The word “church” itself comes from the Greek term *kyriakos*, which means “belonging to the Lord.” The New Testament speaks of the Church as the *ecclesia*. This Greek word, is used 114 times in the New Testament, and means “a called-out, or called-together body” is the root of words such as ecclesiology (the study of the Church), and ecclesiastical (that which relates to the Church). The term was used in New Testament times to refer to a political assembly that governed cities, much like our modern town meetings.

The early Church adopted this word, signifying that it saw itself as being a called-out body of people. The Church is called together out of the world system. “It means those who have heard the call of Christ, as well as the call of His servants, to come out from the world and become faithful followers of their Master” (J.H. Moore, *New Testament Doctrines*, p. 88). No longer are Christians merely citizens of this world, but rather citizens of Heaven (Philippians 3:20). The Church is distinctive in its origin—Jesus established it (**Matthew 16:18**). It is unique in its makeup—all those who trust in Christ and walk in faithful obedience to Him (**1 Corinthians 1:2**). The Church is different in its charter—the New Testament is its rule for faith and practice (**2 Timothy 3:16**). The Church is distinctive in its mission—to do all under the direction of Christ, but primarily proclaim the Gospel of salvation as found in the Bible (**Matthew 28:19-20**). The Church has a matchless future—eternal life with the Bridegroom, Jesus (**Ephesians 5:27**).

The called together, voluntary nature of the Church makes it important that we note the three prominent marks of the faithful Church. They are the faithful preaching of God’s Word; the regular observance of the ordinances; and the careful exercise of both preventive and corrective discipline. These marks contrast the Church with other, manmade institutions. Every other institution—human government, the family, social organizations—will eventually come to an end, while the Church will live throughout eternity as the Bride of Christ.

The Church is a Body

Several metaphors are used to refer to the Church. One of the most prominent is “body.” In **1 Corinthians 12**, we find that the gifts and uses in the Body of Christ are varied, even as the gifts and uses of different parts of the human body.; Each part, or

member Christian, has his or her proper place within the Church of Christ (**1 Corinthians 12:27**).

In **Ephesians 1:22-23**, we find the body of Christ spoken of as the center of Christ's activity.; Jesus did not set out to build up para-Church ministries, valuable as they are.; The focus of Jesus in this present age is His Church. He said, "I will build My Church" (**Matthew 16:18**). It has an intimate connection with the Lord, and because of that, brings about the close relationship of believers to each other. Each part of the Body is related to Christ, and so is related to every other part of the Body. We are not Christians in the solitary sense, isolated from others and relating only to Jesus. We are dependent on other believers. In fact, we need other believers, and other Christians need each believer (**1 Corinthians 12:22**).

The Church Consists of Believers Growing in Christ

The basic requirement for persons to be members of the Church of Jesus Christ is that they have trusted Jesus as their personal Saviour, make a public confession of faith (in baptism—see [*BRF Witness, Volume 38, Number 2*](#)), and live consecrated lives before the Lord. The New Testament assumes that all members of the Church would be believers in Christ. This precludes babies or those who have not accepted Christ from being members. There is no instance in the New Testament where babies are baptized or considered members of the Church before their baptism as believers.

Many professing churches have laid aside the requirement that persons be Christians when they become members. It is enough for them that someone wants to participate, and they believe that the congregation should include all, regardless of relationship to Christ. But not even all those who are baptized are really a part of the true Church. At times, even pastors and other leaders have not experienced being born again. These minimal, often nonexistent, standards have led churches to experience spiritual weakness and ultimately apostasy.

It is important, too, that the Christians in a fellowship be growing in their faith in Christ. Every believer is to be enlarging their understanding and practice of their faith. Real Christians grow in holiness, are concerned about doing good, and are interested in seeing others trust Christ. Every Christian should commit himself to be a faithful attender (**Hebrews 10:25**); a generous giver of money and time (**1 Corinthians 16:2**); one committed to prayer for the Church; and to honor those who labor as leaders in the Church (**1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Hebrews 13:7**).

The Church has Jesus Christ as its Foundation and Head

Jesus taught that He would build His Church (**Matthew 16:18**), and we see the full establishment of that Church in **Acts 2**, when the Holy Spirit came upon the assembled disciples in the upper room in Jerusalem. The rest of the book of Acts shows the development of the Church as a worldwide movement, which embraced people of various backgrounds, nations, and languages.

Jesus is the Foundation of the Church (**Matthew 16:18**). When Jesus spoke of the Rock on which He would build the Church, He was speaking of Himself. Peter, though a strong individual, was but a pebble compared to the Foundation Stone of Jesus.; Jesus chose His disciples and taught them.; He is the Chief Cornerstone. He is the One Who sent the Holy Spirit (**Acts 2:33**).

The Church is called the “Bride of Christ” several times in the New Testament. The initial picture is found in the parable of the bridesmaids in **Matthew 25:1-11**. The Church is loved intensely by Christ. That love is related to the fact that the Church has been chosen by Christ for His purposes (**Ephesians 5:22-23**). **Revelation 21:9** says that the Bride has been prepared for Christ. So, in this way, the Church is Christ’s, and exists for His pleasure.

Jesus is also the Head of the Church. There is no other human “head” of the Church to which it must submit, contrary to the teaching of one major denominational group. He has given specific instructions in His Word. The Church is to cheerfully and willingly submit itself to Christ through His Word. It dare not act contrary to that Word, or else it ceases to be His Church.

The Church is Organized

While the Church is a living organism, every organism needs to be organized, or else it is just a mass that cannot do anything. The Church, since its genesis in **Acts 2**, has always had an organization or “polity.” According to **Acts 2:42**, the early Church had standards (the Apostles’ doctrine); it was joined together in fellowship; it practiced the ordinances; and it prayed together as a body. The early Church had regular places and times of meeting and had regular hours of prayer. Members were regularly (daily) brought into the Church.

There have been three major kinds of church government through history, each of which finds some authority in the New Testament. The **episcopal** system has authority reside in bishops. Bishops can be appointed by those in higher authority, or elected by church assemblies. Anglican, Catholic, and Methodist churches operate with episcopal

government. The *presbyterian* system rests its government in a council of both ordained and lay elders (presbyters) selected by a congregation. These elders represent the congregation in conference with elders from other congregations. Presbyterian and Reformed churches use this kind of leadership. **Congregational** church government rests its authority in the assembled congregation itself and the officers it elects. The congregation is the final authority in all matters. Baptist and independent churches operate under a congregational system.

The New Testament specifies only two necessary officers of the Church. Elders (or overseers) and deacons (servants) were set-apart in every church body, usually on a citywide or geographical basis. Paul commissioned Titus to appoint elders (or bishops) in every city in Crete (**Titus 1:5**). Paul bade farewell to the Ephesian elders in **Acts 20:17, 28**. **Philippians 1:1** mentions bishops and deacons being greeted by Paul. Likely the best system is that which the congregation calls elders and deacons, and then respects the authority of those called. Those called to serve the congregation also maintain accountability to the congregation. Simplicity in organization would seem to reflect the New Testament ideal, rather than have numerous committees just to give people something to do. J. H. Moore wrote, “In order to carry out the apostolic idea of doing things, there should be a plurality of elders in every congregation, and while one of their number may take the lead, there ought to be a careful cooperation of the elders in looking after the spiritual interests of the church” (*New Testament Doctrines*, p. 95).

The duties of the elder are to oversee (**1 Timothy 3:1**) and to rule in the Church (**1 Timothy 5:17**). Elders are to guard the doctrines of the Church from corruption and apostasy (**Titus 1:9**). Specific qualifications for elders are laid out in **1 Timothy 3:1-6** and **Titus 1:7-9**.

Deacons are to be servants of the Church, based on the initial calling of deacons in **Acts 6**. They are to concern themselves with the care of the poor, assisting the minister (apostles or elders), and to generally assist as needed for the entire ministry of the Church.

Pastors, teachers, and evangelists are mentioned in **Ephesians 4:11**—but these are specific gifts exercised by those in leadership (elders and deacons) for the upbuilding of the Church.

The Church has a Purpose

No other organization or body has the threefold duty of the Church of Jesus Christ. That duty is **1)** toward God, as we to worship Him through Jesus Christ (**Colossians**

1:18); 2) toward other believers, as they are edified or disciplined in Jesus Christ (**Ephesians 4:12**); and **3)** toward the world, as we proclaim the Gospel and introduce people to Christ (**Matthew 28:19-20**). Through this threefold purpose, the Church glorifies God in all things. Our time, treasure, and prayers should be toward this end.

Worship ought to be central for the Church. Worship is essentially acknowledging God, and giving Him the praise and honor that is due Him. We are to be proclaiming what God has done in history—He has acted in human events to bring His creation to its right end. We are exalting what God is doing today—He is saving people, to make for Himself a godly people. We are to proclaim what God will do—Jesus will return, set up His Kingdom on the earth, and ultimately take His people to Heaven. In worship, we also uphold the rites and ordinances of the Lord. Every time we meet for worship, witness a baptism, observe the Love Feast, greet one another with the holy kiss, and anoint the sick with oil, we are obedient to what Jesus told the Church to do. It is a treasured opportunity to once more bring praise to God through the assembly.

Edification is the work of building up believers in their faith. Generally this occurs as the Church meets for fellowship, or *koinonia* as found in the New Testament. We need to have the regular encouragement of like-minded believers in Christ, who can give guidance, counsel, material support, and other help when needed. Teaching or discipling is also an important work of the Church in building up Christians (**Ephesians 4:12**). This teaching comes from the pulpit through expository preaching; it comes from the Sunday school hour in systematic study of God's Word; it comes through the midweek prayer meeting or home Bible study in hearing from God through His Word and speaking to God in prayer.

Evangelism is the Church taking the Good News of salvation to those who have not heard it and inviting them to trust Christ and enter into the new relationship with Him and with the Church itself. Some Christians are particularly gifted to tell others the Gospel, yet each of us is commanded to give out the message whenever we are given the opportunity.

Social concern may be a part of the overall mission of the Church (**James 1:27**), but it is not the primary mission or duty. It is a means toward the end of glorifying God, of building up believers, or of bringing others to Christ. It is incidental to the work of the Church, not the focus.

Every believer in Christ should be active in the Church and its local body. Every Christian should seek to make the Church more of what Christ intends for it. Every believer should be using his or her gifts to build up the Body of Christ, to the goal that He might

receive even more glory through His Church. The Church, populated by fallen men and women as it is, is not perfect while still on this earth. It may have many problems and struggles.; Yet, in the plan of God, it is still His instrument for His purposes today, and will continue to be that instrument for His glory until Jesus returns.