

What is the Church?

The church is the community of all true believers for all time. That is, the church is made up of all the men and women who have been, are, or ever will be true believers in Jesus. When Paul wrote in Eph.5:25 that “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,” he was referring to all the people Christ died to redeem. He didn’t just mean those who were alive after Christ had died but also those who looked to God for their salvation before Christ even came to earth. All true believers, regardless of what time period they lived in, make up the true church.

Jesus said that he would build his church (Mt.16:18) by calling people to himself. This pattern of church building is a continuation of the process of building the church before Christ came to earth, for in Old Testament times God was continually calling his people to himself to be a worshiping assembly before him. Just as the whole nation of Israel in the Old Testament was to assemble together to worship God, so Christians today are called to do the same.

The Invisible Yet Visible Church Because we cannot see the spiritual condition of people’s hearts, the true church, in its spiritual reality as the fellowship of all genuine believers, is invisible. Only God can see the condition of people’s hearts. As Paul says in 2 Tim.2:19, “The Lord knows those who are his.” Therefore, the “invisible church” is the church as God sees it.

But the church is also visible. While the invisible church is the church as God sees it, the “visible church” is the church as Christians on earth see it. Therefore, the visible church will contain genuine believers as well as others who do not truly believe or follow the claims of Jesus. But in making this distinction, we should not become overly suspicious regarding the status of those who appear to be true believers. Instead, with benevolent judgment, we should consider all to be members of the universal church who appear to be believers from their confession of faith and their pattern of life.

Other Descriptions of the Church In the New Testament, the word “church” is used to describe different types of groups of believers: a small house church (Rom.16:5; 1 Cor.16:19), the church in an entire city (1 Cor.1:2; 2 Cor.1:1; 1 Thess.1:1), the church in an entire region (Acts 9:31), and the church throughout the entire world (Eph.5:25; 1 Cor.12:28). Therefore, a community of God’s people at any level is rightly called a church.

A variety of metaphors are also used to describe the church. One group of metaphors suggests the church is a family and that the members of the church relate to one another as members of a larger family do. This is why Paul writes in 1 Tim.5:1–2, “Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father. Treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity.” The relationship between Christ and the church is also seen in familial terms with Christ as the groom and the church as his bride (Eph.5:32; 2 Cor.11:2).

Another common image of the church is that of a body. In 1 Cor.12, Paul refers to members of the church as members of one body. Members have their own special function and responsibility just like parts of the body do. In Eph.1:22–23; 4:15–16 and Col.2:19, the church is referred to as a body with Christ as its head, holding the entire body together and equipping every part to work as it should.

There are many other metaphors used for the church, such as a new temple (1 Pet.2:4–8), a holy priesthood (1 Pet.2:5), branches on a vine (Jn.15:5), an olive tree (Rom.11:17–24), and a field of crops (1 Cor.3:6–9). The wide range of metaphors used for the church should remind us not to focus too much on any one. An unbalanced emphasis on one metaphor to the exclusion of others will result in an unbalanced view of the church. Instead, we should consider each metaphor as a different perspective on the church, something that tells us a little more about the community of which God has allowed us to be a part.

What Makes a Church a Church? If a group of people meet together to discuss spiritual things, does that make them a church? What if they do so in a church building as opposed to a coffee shop? What if, in addition to discussion, they sing and pray together? What if they add Bible reading to their group time? What activities make a church a church?

Traditionally, many Christian writers have agreed that there are two major activities (or “marks”) that every church must exhibit in order to be truly considered a church. The first is correct preaching from the Bible. This mark has less to do with the form of the sermon than with the content of the sermon. If the sermons in a church continually contain false doctrine or conceal the true gospel message of salvation by faith alone, then the church in which those sermons are preached is not a true church.

The second mark of a true church is the correct administration of the sacraments (or “ordinances”), which are baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Once an organization begins to practice baptism and the Lord’s Supper in a biblical way, then that organization is functioning as a church. The practice of the two sacraments is considered a mark of a true church because the sacraments can serve as membership controls for the church; that is, baptism is a means for admitting individuals into the church, and partaking in the Lord’s Supper is a way those members continue to show their good standing within the church body. Therefore, historically, many writers have said that only those churches that properly practice the sacraments are considered true churches.

But with so many parachurch organizations today (that is, special ministries such as mission agencies, university Christian groups, and Christian colleges), it is helpful to add another “mark” of a true church: in order to be a church, an organization should be attempting to function as a church, rather than encouraging its members to become part of a local church.

Among true churches, two further distinctions — as emphasized in the New Testament — can be made. A church can be more or less pure and more or less unified. The purity of the church is determined by its degree of freedom from wrong doctrine and conduct and its degree of conformity to God’s revealed will for the church. Christ’s goal for the church is “that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:26–27). Therefore, as members of the church, we should pursue its purity in all areas to the best of our ability.

In addition, we should also pursue unity — that is, freedom from divisions among true Christians — to the best of our ability. When we do this, we are falling in line with Jesus’ prayer in John 17:21 for future believers “that they may all be one.” This does not mean that there must be one worldwide church government over all Christians, for unity can be manifested in other ways. It does, however, mean that every true church should try to cooperate and affiliate with other true

churches and Christian groups in various appropriate ways from time to time. Churches that tend to be constantly in disagreement with most other churches should prayerfully consider how well they are working toward Christ's goal of unity among believers.

What Is the Church Supposed to Do? The church is supposed to minister to God, to its members, and to the world. Ministry to God is done through worshiping him. In Col.3:16, Paul encourages the church to sing "psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God." Worship in the church is not merely a preparation for something else; it is in itself a fulfillment of a major purpose of the church, whose members were created to live for the praise of God's glory (Eph.1:12).

The church's ministry to its members is done through nurturing and building them up so that the church can "present everyone mature in Christ" (Col.1:28). As Paul said in Eph.4:12 – 13, the church's gifted leaders were given "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

The church's ministry to the world is done through preaching the gospel to all people in word and in deed. In Mt.28:19, Jesus commands his disciples to "make disciples of all nations." In Acts 1:8, the disciples were told to spread the gospel message "to the end of the earth." And the pattern of preaching in Scripture is clear: the message is to be given in both word (through evangelism) and deed (through ministries of mercy).

Each church should be involved in various kinds of ministries of word and deed, including not only evangelism but also ministry to the poor and oppressed (Gal.2:10; James 1:27). And while there seems to be a primacy placed on caring for the physical needs of fellow believers (Acts 11:29; 2 Cor.8:4; 1 Jn.3:17), all members of the church, as they have opportunity, are to "do good to everyone" (Gal.6:10).

Every church should attempt to fulfill the three purposes God created it for (worship, nurture, and evangelism and mercy). One purpose is not more important than the other, and no church should seek to make one purpose primary to the neglect of the others. Instead, with the full confidence in Christ's promise that he will build his church (Mt.16:18), every church should wholeheartedly seek to worship God, build its members to maturity, and preach the good news of the gospel to the world through word and deed.

Questions for Review and Application

1. How is a church different from a Bible study or Christian retreat?
2. Why should Christians become members of a church? What are some of the dangers of not becoming a member of a local church?
3. Can you list some of the things a church is supposed to do?