

C. The Church

— And Membership —

What Is The Church?

Most people answer this question by describing a building with steeples and pews. They identify the people who attend meetings at that building as “members” of that church.

It doesn't take much Bible reading to recognize this definition of “the Church” is not completely accurate. Churches usually do meet in buildings and these buildings tend to have certain architectural characteristics. And those who attend a given church building would most likely be members of that church. But the church is much more than this.

Customary in Paul's salutations was the phrase “the church that meets at their house” (Romans 16:5; 1 Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15). This is obviously not a reference to a building but to the believers who met there.

Paul also called the Church “the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12). The phrase is used to describe the vital union between Christ (the Head) and His Church (the Body), which has many members, all submitted to and dependent on Christ as her Head.

The Meaning Of “Church”

“Church” appears 84 times in the English New Testament. It is our translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*. To the Greeks it meant “any public assembly of people.” It became an appropriate description of the Christian community, for they regularly met together for the purposes of worship, teaching, fellowship and celebration.

Our English word is taken from the Greek adjective *kyriakon*. It means “belonging to the Lord.” Again, this term is an accurate description, because the Church is composed of those who “belong to the Lord.” That is the one and only biblical criteria for membership.

It is clear the early church saw itself as a community rather than an institution. In the Book of Acts, the believers refer to the church as “the brethren,” “the disciples,” “followers of the way,” or “saints.” It was not until later the term *ekklesia* began to be used to describe the community of believers.

Who Is “The Church”?

Peter gives one of the most beautiful descriptions of the church: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness

into His wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy” (1Peter 2:9,10). This is God’s view of the church. Clearly she is the whole community of believers, having been redeemed by the “blood of the Lamb,” precious in His sight, immeasurable in worth!

Jesus And The Church

When we read through the New Testament, Jesus is the first to teach about the church. In Matthew 18:15-18, He identifies the church as the place where disputes between Christians and discipline should be handled. Then in verse 20 He adds, “For where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them.” This tells us three important things about the church:

- 1) “Church” happens whenever two or more Christians come together in spiritual agreement, for then He is “in the midst of them.” This infers harmony, love, and fellowship between believers; and creating a time of thankfulness, celebration, and worship. When Christians are divided, angry and sinful, the work of God is hindered. Church services may go on, but the Spirit will not minister freely or fully.
- 2) The “Church” is a place where the Spirit of God manifests Himself to us differently from our ordinary, daily experience. This explains why we are admonished to “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another” (Hebrews 10:25).
- 3) It’s not the same when we are alone. We are the “Temple of God,” and He does indwell us, always present in our hearts. But there is a mystical dynamic present in Christian fellowship; God ministers to us in ways that do not take place when we are alone.

Membership Has Its Privileges

Participation in “church” is part of a well-balanced spiritual diet. Every spiritually fit and healthy believer needs to maintain certain commitments: Bible reading, prayer, sharing our faith, and “fellowship.”

Once we are “born again” into God’s family, we automatically gain membership in His church (1 Corinthians 12:13). You now have all the rights and responsibilities of membership.

Don’t get into the habit of skipping church. Exercise your privilege!