

# Understanding The Church

A church is not a building. A church is not a denomination. A church is not a group of believers that simply meet together. A church is a body of believers comprised of those who have covenanted together to live out the life of Christ. A church is the body of Christ that functions in accordance to the commands and directives given by God in His Word.

One cow is a cow, but a whole bunch of cows is a herd. One sheep is a sheep, but several sheep is a flock. So if one Christian is a Christian, do several Christians make what we call a church? Is that what a church is, just several Christians who happen to be in close proximity to one another? Do Christians attending a Christian concert or an evangelistic crusade constitute a church? Not according to God's Word.

A church is more than a building, a gathering, or an organization. It is an organism. It's referred to as the body of Christ. Although this is used metaphorically, it clearly describes how it must function in accordance to Christ's design.

When we join a church, we accept all that God has to say about us and the world. We understand that neither we, nor any of the members are perfect. While the body of the church is made up of sinners, it is made up of repenting sinners. Church member are sinners who have been saved by God's grace. Our lives are no longer characterized by sin, but we understand that we are still plagued by the sinful nature and thus will have trouble with sin (1 John 1:8, 10).

## What Does A Church Do?

1. It carries out the plan and work of God (Matt. 28:18-20).
2. It provides the framework for using and perfecting a believer's spiritual gift (1 Cor. 12:12-31).
3. It provides affirmation of a person's belief that He is saved when a church receives him as a member (Rom. 16:2; 1 John 1:3-4; 1 John 2:19).
4. It enables a believer to fulfill God's command to edify or build up one another (Eph. 4:11-16).
5. It provides spiritual safeguards for believers in that the leaders and members are instructed to be concerned about each other's welfare (1 Thess. 5:11; Heb. 13:7)
6. It practices the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper given to us by Christ. (Some churches also include "Foot Washing.")
7. It provides biblical preaching of the Gospel.

## What Should A Church Be?

1. It should be characterized by holiness (1 Peter 1:15-16).
2. It should be more concerned about honoring Christ than it is about upsetting members (Acts 5:28).
3. It should be a place where the Word of Christ dwells richly (Col. 3:16).
4. It should be a body that is united for the glory of God and the good of the body (1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:3, 13; 1 Pet. 3:8).
5. It should be a place where we can speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15).
6. It should be a place where excellence is valued and practiced (1 Cor. 14:12; 2 Cor. 8:7).
7. It should be a place of peace and order (1 Cor. 14:33).

## What Is A Church?

The church is made up of people who have repented of their sins and have received Christ as their Lord and Savior. It's a body of believers who are connected by their faith in Christ and by their submission to the authority of Christ and His Word.

The word that is translated church in the New Testament is found 109 times in reference to God's church. A few of them, Acts 8:3; 9:31; 1 Cor. 12:28; 15:9 and Matt. 16:18 refer to the Christian community as a whole. This is known as the universal church (no connection to the denominational Universal Church). The rest of the occurrences refer to a local body of believers—a local church. When we accept Christ as our Lord and Savior we are automatically baptized into the universal church of Christ by the Holy Spirit. But we must choose to become a part of a local church.

How does the Bible describe the local church? Think for a minute of the images the New Testament uses for the church. (*The following was taken from a "Membership Matters" class at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.*)

- A. Sometimes Paul uses the image of a building (1 Cor. 3:9, Eph. 2:21, 2 Cor. 6:16)
- B. Sometimes the image is of a body (Rom. 12:4-5; Heb. 12)
- C. Sometimes the church is a flock (1 Peter 5:2).
- D. Sometimes the image is of a family (1 Tim. 3:15; Eph. 1:5).

But in all these things, we have to ask, "If we are Christians, what should our relationship to the church be?" Using those images...

- Where are the bricks? They are in a building, and if they aren't in the building then they can't really identify with it.
- If we are members of the physical body, then how can we not be attached to it?
- If we are sheep, we are going to be in a flock.
- If we are called to be God's children, we are going to be in His family.

All the images that are used about being a Christian in the New Testament have this corporate aspect to it.

In reference to church membership, think about these images. The bricks of a building are useless unless they are connected by the mortar between them. The members of a body are only members if they are connected to the body. We may call ourselves members of an extended family, but we don't have the same rights and privileges from the aspect of the law in times of medical emergencies, unless we are legally a part of the family. A shepherd doesn't have the same responsibility for a sheep that wanders into his flock and the sheep doesn't have the same rights as those of the flock until it becomes a part of it.

God saves us so that we might bring glory to Him and He has determined that we do this by living out our Christian life in communion with other Christians. Failure to do so is to fail to live out what the Bible says is absolutely fundamental to what it means to be a Christian.

The Christian life is not about what we can get from God, but about what we can do for God. Everything that Jesus did was in obedience to His heavenly Father. This was how He honored and glorified His Father (John 17:4). If we are His followers, then we too will want to glorify God by doing all that He has given us to do. Becoming a member of His universal church family through salvation is the first step, and becoming a member of His body—the local church through church membership is an essential step in our spiritual growth process.

We live in a very individualistic, consumeristic society. Being a member of and committed to the church is God's way of getting the world out of us. It's within the framework of the church that we learn to work together for the glory of God, not the betterment of self. The church helps us learn how to love the unlovable and forgive the unforgiveable. The church is all about being committed to a group of people and a higher purpose even when the people may let us down or the work may be difficult and the recognition may be lacking.