

UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

Part 21 – The Church

Key Questions:

- What purposes did God give the Church? What should local churches do to meet these purposes?

The meaning of “church”

When the Bible talks about a church it never refers to a building. In fact, at the time when the New Testament was written there were no buildings built especially for Christian meetings – the Christians met in privately owned houses or, in some cities, in the Jewish meeting place (called a “synagogue”). In the Bible the word “church” always refers to people, but it is used in two related but distinct senses:

- The one church** (sometimes called the “universal church”) – often the New Testament uses the word “church” to mean all true Christians all over the world. Of course, no person knows all the members of the Universal Church – it is a spiritual reality, and its members are known only to God. Jesus promised that He would build His Church (Matthew 16:18), and so the Church was His plan. In this sense there is only one Church, with its basis in Christ and His apostles (Ephesians 2:20). The Church is united by the fact that we share a common faith, pray to the same Father God, obey the same Lord Jesus and share life in the same Holy Spirit (Ephesians 4:4-6). Of course, this does not mean that we are united with everyone who claims to be a Christian, but that all true Christians are already united in Christ – our responsibility is to keep this unity in the way we treat and speak about each other (Ephesians 4:3).
- The local church** – in the very beginning there was only one local church in Jerusalem (see Acts 2). At that time the Universal Church was able to meet together in one place. As the good news about Jesus spread and people living in other places became Christians this was no longer possible. Christians in different locations began to meet together as local churches, with clearly defined membership and recognised leaders. Strictly speaking this does not mean that there were many different churches, as each of these was a local gathering (or “congregation”) of the Universal Church. Local churches are, therefore, smaller groups of Christians in one town or area who meet together, and they should be miniature, localised representations of the Universal Church. The picture has been confused over 2000 years of church history by many different divisions and ideas which lead to local churches taking different names and organising into “denominations” (groups of local churches who share a common position on some belief or a common history). Most local churches have a membership, and the leaders of the church know who its members are. The aim should be that all members of a local church are also members of the Universal Church – in other words, that only true Christians should be members of local churches. For this reason leaders of local churches often interview people who want to join to make sure that their beliefs and lifestyle are in keeping with the teaching of the Bible.

In modern usage the word has come to be used to describe church buildings as well, since most churches in the West have purpose-built buildings. But strictly speaking, these buildings should be called “church buildings” or “church halls” and the word church should describe the people who meet there.

The first church (Acts 2:42-47)

After Simon Peter preached on the Day of Pentecost, around 3,000 people became Christians and were baptised. Added to the apostles and the other disciples, this made around 3,500 Christians in the city of Jerusalem. The things this first local church did can teach us a great deal about what a local church should be like:

- The apostles’ Teaching** – the apostles were the authorised representatives of Jesus, personally appointed by Him, and their teaching had authority for the first church. Teaching is very important for the church, as Christians believe that even after becoming a Christian people must continue to grow in their faith. It is by hearing God’s word and obeying it in the Holy Spirit’s power that Christians can grow to become more like Jesus. The apostles’ teaching was recorded for us in the New Testament books, and in local churches today the Bible should be regarded as the final authority for any differences of opinion. In most modern church meetings teaching from the Bible is an important part.
- The Fellowship** – the word “fellowship” means simply “sharing”. In the first church the Christians shared their lives with each other. They spent time together including meeting in the Temple courts and eating together in their homes. They also shared their possessions together to meet the needs of any person who was in need. This sharing is summarised by saying that they “had everything in common”. The best way to think of a church is as a community or a family. People meet together because they love each other and care about the things that are happening in one another’s lives. Christians support each other practically and by listening to, praying for, and advising one another.
- Breaking of Bread** – this is a reference to the Lord’s Supper, which Jesus gave to His disciples as a sign of the New Covenant (see *Part 20*). This celebration was important for the first church, and it remains important for churches today. Some churches have the Lord’s Supper every Sunday, while others have it less often (perhaps once per month).
- Prayer and Praising God** – the first church was devoted to prayer. They believed in meeting together to pray to God about many different issues. They also spent time together praising God. To “praise” means to give thanks and celebrate God as the source of good things. From a very early stage Christians began to do this by singing songs (just as the nation of Israel did in the Old Testament using the psalms). In churches today praise remains very important, especially in the singing of songs, which are part of most church meetings. Prayer is also an important part of church

life. Church meetings usually include one or more prayers, and there are even meetings completely devoted to prayer. The reason why prayer is so important to Christians is that God is our King, and therefore His will for us is most important. Prayer expresses our faith in Him and asks for His Spirit to fill us and work in us.

- 5. Witnessing to others** – the first church was very effective in reaching the other people in Jerusalem with the message about Jesus. In fact, their approach to church was so loving and caring that they found favour with the people. The result was that every day some people would become Christians and would join the church. The Christians took every opportunity they had to share the good news about Jesus because they believed that it was the only true way to know God. Churches today are still very active in sharing the message of the Bible with other people and in caring for other people who are in need. Our mission is to be like Jesus in caring for others and to share His love and teaching with others. Christian churches often support mission work in other countries, and even send members across the world.

Pictures of the church in the Bible

A spiritual building (Ephesians 2:19-22)

Paul describes the Church as being like a building built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Jesus being the cornerstone (which bears the weight of an arch, holding the building together). Christians are being built together like stones in the building (see Peter's comments in 1 Peter 2:5) to form a temple where the Holy Spirit lives. This picture shows us that the main purpose of the Church is to be a place where God lives, and so to bring worship to God.

A body (Ephesians 1:22-23)

Paul describes the Church as the body of Christ. Although Jesus is not physically present on earth today, He is present through the Church, and we are here to do the things He wants us to do. He is the head, meaning that He gives the body its direction. Jesus is the only leader of all Christians. In 1 Corinthians chapter 12 Paul uses the idea of the body to show that every Christian has a unique role to play in the local church (in the same way that different parts of the body have different functions) but that all parts are different. God has given every Christian gifts that they can use to serve other Christians in the church. Most work in churches is done by people who volunteer their time without being paid to do it.

A family (1 Timothy 5:1-3)

The relationships between Christians in the church are similar to those between members of a family. The main emphasis here is on the love that Christians have for one another. This love comes from God, and is greater than natural human love. Because God loves us and He teaches us how to love others, we love one another, even though we might be different from each other. This love can overcome any differences of culture, race, language or age.

What do churches do?

The aims of any church are simple – to worship God, to reach other people with the good news about Jesus, to help Christians to grow in their faith, to care for one another, and to serve others in love. Churches have many different types of activities to help reach these aims, for example:

- **Sunday Services** – most churches have their main meetings on a Sunday, since this was the day when Jesus rose again. This was also the day when the first Christians met for their main meeting (see Acts 20:7, 18; 1 Corinthians 16:2). In these services there will usually be singing praise songs, public prayers, teaching from the Bible and announcements about other church events. There may also be sharing from some Christians about their experiences and the Lord's Supper may be celebrated. An offering of money will usually be collected and used to help people in need, to help spread the message about Jesus, and to pay for the salaries of church workers and maintenance of the buildings.
- **Prayer Meetings** – these meetings may be at any time or day of the week. The Christians will usually share about problems they are facing, needs that people have, activities the church is planning, and things to thank God for. They will then spend time to talk to God in prayer, speaking aloud. The other Christians will usually remain silent, sometimes saying "Amen" which means "I agree".
- **Small groups** (sometimes called "cell groups" or "home groups") – these are smaller meetings of Christians, often in the homes of church members, for more informal fellowship. They usually include a Bible study, where the Christians discuss the meaning of a Bible passage and how they can apply it to their lives, and a time of prayer.
- **Sunday School and youth activities** – special activities for children and teenagers where they are taught the Bible and encouraged to love and serve one another. Sunday School often takes place during the Sunday service.
- **Service and outreach activities** – local churches often arrange special activities to help people in need or to care for others, as well as activities where the good news about Jesus is spoken or shared.

Church Leadership

There are many different patterns for how local churches are organised, but the Bible speaks of two types of leader (elders and deacons – see 1 Timothy chapter 3), and most churches have a third type (pastors):

- a) **Elders** – these people oversee the activities of the church. They have a responsibility to care for members, to teach the Bible, and to give overall direction to the church.
- b) **Deacons** – are the people who look after the practical, day to day running of the church business. They often have specific responsibilities (e.g. treasurer or secretary), and work under the guidance of the elders.
- c) **Pastors (or ministers)** – these people work for the church and have similar responsibilities to an elder. In many churches the pastor will have the main responsibility for teaching the Bible and caring for people in need.

Church leadership should be servant leadership. Unlike the normal ideas of power and control seen in leaders in many organisations, the leaders should set an example of humility, love and service for others, just as Jesus did.

Key Lesson: The Church is the body of Christ doing His work in the world

Jesus founded the Church and it is His body in the world doing the things that He commands it to do. Every local church has the responsibility to carry on Christ's mission. Every Christian should be committed to a local church.