

## The Church and our relationship to it

A holistic survey

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What is the church? When did it begin? Why are there so many denominations?

The word *church* is a Greek word--*ekklesia*. It means “*that which is called out for a special purpose; an assembly.*”

The first thing to learn is that the Bible speaks of the church in two different ways: the *Universal Church*, which is an organism, and the *Local Church*, which is an organization.

### **The Universal Church--an Organism**

Definition: The universal church is that organism of professing believers making up the body of Christ through baptism by the Holy Spirit, which was formed first on the day of Pentecost, is distinct from the nation of Israel, and is not limited to local congregational or denominational affiliation.

Everyone, living or dead, who has ever put their faith in Jesus Christ from the day of Pentecost till now, is a member of the universal church, Christ's body, of which He is the head ([Ephesians 1:22](#)).

### **What did Jesus say about the church?**

Read [Matthew 16:18-19](#).

### **Christ spoke of the church as future.**

When Christ spoke these words the church was still future, so it did not exist when He was here on earth. Who is the foundation upon which the church is built? Who or what is the *rock* that Christ referred to?

Peter himself says that Christ is the Rock ([1 Peter 2:4-8](#)) and the Apostle Paul affirms this in [1 Corinthians 3:11](#) (no other foundation; [Ephesians 2:20](#)).

Or it may mean that Peter's confession, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”, is the rock, because everyone who becomes a member of the universal church must believe that is the truth about Jesus.

### **When was the church born?**

Read [Acts 1:5](#) and [2:1-4](#).

The church was born at Pentecost, about ten days after Jesus ascended back to heaven. The Holy Spirit came down to place every believer into the body of Christ and to indwell every believer personally and permanently. Pentecost was to the Holy Spirit as Christmas was to Jesus. He came to relate to all believers in different ways.

Paul speaks of the church as a *mystery*.

Read [Ephesians 3:6](#).

This mystery is that Jews and Gentiles are joined together to form a new entity through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The only qualification for membership is faith in the risen Savior. The church is a totally new thing made up of believing Jews and Gentiles.

It is clear then, that every believer since Pentecost, living and dead, is a member of the body of Christ, the universal church. Dead believers are alive with the Lord waiting for the day we'll all be together.

### **The Local Church--an Organization**

Definition: The local church is an assembly of professing believers who observe ordinances, are organized under a certain governmental structure, and who impact their community for Christ through the public worship of God, the edification of the members, and evangelization of the lost.

There is a distinction between members in the universal church and the local church. The universal church consists only of believers, but the local church can have members who say they are believers and really are not. It's possible to be a member of a local church and not be a member of the body of Christ. That can be through ignorance or deception. Some churches require that you go through their rituals but don't explain that faith in Christ is really what saves, nor do they determine that a person has made that decision. Some people may say that they believe, but they are pretenders, hypocrites. In our church, we do our best to ask each person who wishes to join to give their personal testimony about when they trusted Christ as Savior. But we can still be fooled. Only God knows the heart!

### **Why so many different Christian denominations?**

Most denominations started out agreeing on the basic doctrines of the faith, but they disagreed on other things--mode of baptism, whether salvation can be lost, physical healing, charismatic gifts, church government, styles of worship. I believe that the variety we have meets the needs of different people. Some like ritual and liturgy, some like strong Bible teaching, some like casual services, some like a lot of emotion, some like very little.

### **Church Government**

There are three basic forms of church government.

**Episcopal** (*Episkopos*): Authority over the church resides in the bishop. (Methodist, simple; Episcopal/Anglican, more complex; and Roman Catholic, hierarchy headed by the Bishop of Rome, Pope.)

**Presbyterian** (*Presbuteros*): Authority over the church resides in a group of representatives to whom authority has been granted by the congregation, elders. (Presbyterian, Reformed and some Bible churches.)

**Congregational**: This stresses the role of the individual Christian, making the congregation the final authority in matters. Every member has a vote. (Baptist and Evangelical Free, Bible and independent churches.) Our church is a combination of these last two. We are Elder governed and Staff run, and the congregation votes on the Pastor, Associate Pastor, Elders, and the budgets.

## Elders

Spiritual leadership is the responsibility of the elders. Their qualifications are found in [1 Timothy 3:1-7](#) and [Titus 1:6-9](#), which restricts this office to men. They are responsible to protect the church from doctrinal error and to serve the church as shepherds (pastors) caring for God's flock ([Acts 20:17, 28](#)).

## Deacons

Deacons do the practical work of leadership under the spiritual authority of the elders. They take care of those in the congregation in need. Women can be deacons. ([Romans 16](#); [1 Timothy 3:8-11](#).)

## Ordinances of the Local Church

*Ordinance*: "An outward rite prescribed by Christ to be performed by the church."

They are called *sacraments* by some.

*Sacrament*: "A sacrament is something presented to the senses, which has the power, by divine institution, not only of *signifying*, but also of efficiently *conveying* grace." RC Council of Trent.

We do not believe that either the Lord's Supper or baptism is a means of conveying grace. We believe that they are done in obedience to Christ's commands to picture externally what has already taken place internally in our hearts. Both of these ordinances commemorate the death, burial and resurrection of Christ.

## Baptism

Read [Matthew 28:19](#).

**Mode**: *Immersion* is the primary meaning of the Greek word *baptizo*.

Immersion best pictures the significance of baptism, which is death to the old life and resurrection to the new. This church practices immersion, but arguing and dividing about mode of baptism is non-productive. Every believer should be baptized as soon as he or she knows that Christ commanded it. It's a public testimony to your identification and union with Christ. If you were baptized before you became a believer, then you should consider being re-baptized as a believer. Baptism is obedience to your Lord.

## The Lord's Supper, Communion, Eucharist

Read [1 Corinthians 11:23-32](#).

There are several purposes for observing the Lord's Supper:

1. It's a remembrance of the life and death of our Lord. The unleavened bread represents the perfect life of our Lord which qualified Him to be an acceptable sacrifice for sin. It represents His body which bore our sin on the cross. The wine represents his blood shed for the remission of our sins.

2. [1 Corinthians 11:26](#) says that this memorial supper proclaims the basic facts of the gospel. *It proclaims the Lord's death.*

3. It reminds us that Jesus Christ is coming again and we are to observe it till He comes.
4. It should also remind us of our oneness with each other in the body of Christ and of the fellowship which share as fellow members of that body ([1 Corinthians 10:17](#)).

### **Who can partake?**

A non-believer shouldn't because it's a ceremony to identify only those who have professed faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the atonement of their sins.

Can any believer partake regardless of denominational membership? Yes. This is the *Lord's Table* and all members of the universal church are invited. It's not *Baptist* or *Catholic* or *Bible church*. Restrictions based on denominational affiliation go against the call for unity in the universal church. (Communion at Lausanne)

Warning! [1 Corinthians 11:27-32](#): We are to observe soul-searching and confession of sins before partaking. Otherwise, we may be disciplined--such as by sickness, or even death.

### **The purpose for the Local Church**

1. Worship and show its love for the Lord ([Revelation 2:4](#)).
2. Minister to its own members so that they encourage each other to love and good works ([Hebrews 10:24](#)).
3. Be the agency for carrying out the Great Commission. The gospel should be preached in the services so that unbelievers can respond.
4. Should care for its own who are in need, e.g., widows, orphans and the poor ([James 1:27](#); [1 Timothy 5:1-16](#)).
5. Do good in the world ([Galatians 6:10](#)).
6. To produce mature, stable, holy Christians ([Colossians 1:28](#); [Hebrews 6:1](#); [Ephesians 4:14-16](#)). This may mean discipline in the area of morals and maintenance of purity in doctrine ([1 Corinthians 5](#), [2 Timothy 2:16-18](#)).

### **Illustrations of Universal Church**

Christ is the Shepherd and we are the sheep ([John 10](#))--care and security.

Christ is the vine and we are the branches ([John 15](#))--fruitfulness and strength.

Christ is the cornerstone and we are the stones in the building ([Ephesians 2:19-21](#))--Cornerstone gives direction and is laid only once.

Christ is the High Priest and we are a kingdom of priests ([1 Peter 2](#))--we offer ourselves, our substance and our service.

Christ is the Head and we are members of His body (1 Corinthians 12)--as Head, He directs; as members we serve each other through the exercise of the spiritual gifts he has given us.

Christ is the Bridegroom and we are His bride (Ephesians 5:25-33, Revelation 19:7-8)--everlasting love and intimacy.

Christ is the Heir and we are joint-heirs (Hebrews 1:2, Romans 1:17)--we will share all His glories.

Christ is the firstfruits and we are the harvest (1 Corinthians 15:23)--his resurrection guarantees ours.

Christ is the Master and we are His servants (Colossians 4:1, 1 Corinthians 7:22)--the servant does his master's will. The master takes care of the servant.

### **How do we apply these facts?**

We should each be sure that we are members in the universal church, no matter what church we worship in. Membership in the universal church is secured by trusting the Lord Jesus Christ as your Savior. There is great assurance in knowing that you are a member of the universal church, the body of Christ. This assurance should motivate you to identify with a local church where you can grow and you can serve. A church like ours doesn't require membership for service in most areas. But isn't it a good idea to indicate your support for the church where you receive blessing and spiritual growth by joining it? Joining means that you identify yourself with the people here. They are your family. You give financially. You support and help those in need. You fellowship, you serve. Joining means COMMITMENT! If you have been coming to this church regularly and consider it your church, then don't you think you should become a member? New membership classes are held at least four times a year. They are held on two consecutive Sunday mornings. If you apply to join, you have a personal interview with an elder, so that you can give your testimony of faith in Christ. Then you are presented to the church.

I hope this overview of our doctrinal statement has informed, encouraged, stabilized and given you the resources you need to answer anyone who asks you, "What does your church believe"?

### **Study Questions**

**Read Matthew 16:13-18; Acts 2:1-4, 41-47**

1. In what tense did Jesus speak of the church when He was here on earth? When was the church born? What activities characterized the believers in the church?

**Read 1 Corinthians 3:9-10; Ephesians 19-22**

2. Who is the only foundation of the church?

**Read 1 Timothy 3:15; 1 Corinthians 12:13, 27; Ephesians 2:19-22; Ephesians 5:30-32**

3. What is the church called in each of these passages? What is the significance of each symbol? Do you think this refers to the local church or the universal church? Who are the members of the universal church? How might they differ from members of the local church?

**Read 1 Corinthians 12**

4. What does this passage tell you about the way members of the body of Christ should function? How are we alike? Different? What attitude should we have towards each other? Towards ourselves?

**Read Matthew 26:26-29; Luke 22:19-20; 1 Corinthians 11:23-31**

5. What ordinance did Jesus command His church to keep until He returns? What does it commemorate? What should we each do before participating? What is the punishment for taking it “in an unworthy manner”?

**Read Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 2:36-47; Romans 6:1-5**

6. What other ordinance did Jesus command His church to keep? When was it done in the early church? What does it symbolize? How is it a testimony to others?

**Read John 15:9-10**

7. What is the major reason that believers should be baptized and observe communion? What does our obedience prove? Have you been baptized since you trusted Christ?

8. Why is it necessary for our growth to spiritual maturity to be involved in and committed to a local church? What will we miss that can only be found in a local body of believers? What answer would you give a believer who says, “I don’t need to go to church. I worship God on my own”?