

Milk & Honey

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Spiritual Food and Encouragement for Believers in the Lord Jesus Christ

The Church - What is it?

Steve Hulshizer

I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. (Matt. 16:18)

Many individuals, including Christians, are either confused about, or unaware of what the Bible teaches concerning the Church. Many others who would make every effort to protect the “fundamentals of the faith” have little concern for what the Bible teaches about the Church. In this article we will very briefly look at what the Bible teaches on this important truth by considering the following subjects:

1. The Church Defined
2. The Church Age
3. The Current Mission of the Church
4. The Functions of the Local Church
5. The Church’s Destiny

1. The Church Defined

Most individuals have the wrong idea of what the Church is, and this is apparent in their use of the word. Too often the word “church” is used to speak of a building or an organization, which is not at all how the Bible describes the Church.

The English word “church” does not give us the real meaning of the Greek word used in writing the New Testament. Church would best be translated as “assembly.” The Church, or Assembly, is an “assembly” or “gathering” of those who have been “called out” of this world. It is a gathering of “called-out-ones” who have been separated to God from the world by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 1:9)

Man-made denominations have divided the Church along many lines, but the Bible speaks of only one Church (Assembly). There is only one gathering of Christians in which every Christian becomes a member by faith in Jesus Christ, that is the Church of God (1 Cor. 1:2) One may be a member of a man-made church or denomination and not be a member of “the Church.” Similarly, one may not be a member of any man-made church or denomination but be a member of “the Church.”

It would be helpful to note the difference between the “universal” Church (Eph. 5:25), of which all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are members, and “local” gatherings of Christians, which the Bible refers to as “churches.” (Gal. 1:2) Obviously, while all Christians are in “the Church,”

all Christians can not gather together in one location, and thus, local “churches” or “assemblies” of God’s people are formed. (In this article we will use a capital “C” to denote the universal Church [Assembly] and a small “c” in referring to local churches [assemblies].)

In describing the Church, the Bible uses various illustrations or pictures. The Church is spoken of as a “temple.” (Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Peter 2:5) This is not a physical building made of stones and mortar but a spiritual building which the Lord is erecting with “living stones.” Those who accept the Gospel of Jesus Christ are saved and added to the Church as “living stones” (Acts 2:41; 1 Peter 2:5). When the Bible speaks of the Church as a “temple,” it is teaching us that those in the Church are to be “worshippers” who offer up spiritual sacrifices unto God. (1 Pet. 2:5; Hebrews 13:15)

The Church is also spoken of as the “bride of Christ.” (Eph. 5:22-32) This illustrates the unique relationship between Christ and the Church. Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it. The Church, in turn, as Christ’s bride, is to be in submission to Him as its Head. (Eph. 5:22-24) The Church, as Christ’s future bride, is also to keep itself pure. Just as an engaged woman would keep herself pure for her future husband, the Church is to keep herself unspotted from the world for Christ’s sake. (2 Cor. 11:2; James 1:27)

The Church is also described as the “body of Christ” over which Christ is the “Head.” (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:18) Here the authority of Christ and the unity of the body are emphasized. The body of Christ, made up of all believers in Christ who are alive on the earth at any point in time, is to carry out the will of its risen and glorified Head in heaven. He has given gifts (men) to the Church for the purpose of building up and strengthening the members of His body in order that they in turn can contribute to the body’s spiritual and numerical growth. (Eph. 4:11-14) Each member of the

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body of Christ has been given at least one spiritual gift so that he or she can contribute to the working of the body. (1 Cor. 12:4-7)

The members of the body of Christ are to work together in the same way the members of our physical body work together. Each member is to do his part for the common good of the whole body. Each spiritual member functions where the Lord has placed him, while also recognizing his need of the other members. Not only do the members work together, they suffer together. Just as the hand comes to the aid of the foot when it gets hurt, members of the body of Christ come to the aid of others who are suffering. Members of the body of Christ also rejoice together when one member is honored. The members of the body of Christ are in it together, through thick or thin! (1 Cor. 12:26)

Each local church is spoken of as a "lampstand" or "candlestick." (Rev. 1:20) Here the thought is that of "testimony." Each local church is to shine for Christ. They are to have a testimony to the dark world around them. The Name of Christ is to be honored and held high for those in the local community to see. (Phil. 2:15-16) The risen Christ is keenly aware of the actions and attitudes of each local assembly of believers (Rev. 1:9-20), and a failure to maintain moral and spiritual purity in the church will result in the removal of the local church's testimony. (Rev. 2:5)

We have seen that there is only one Church, over which the risen and glorified Christ is the Head and in which all believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are members. While man-made denominations have taken many names (Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, etc.) and thereby divided the body of Christ, the only Person to which the Church should gather is Christ. (Matt. 18:20) To take any other name than "Christian" is not Biblical, and to gather to any person other than Christ Himself is an offense to Him, as it is His Church and He is the Head of it.

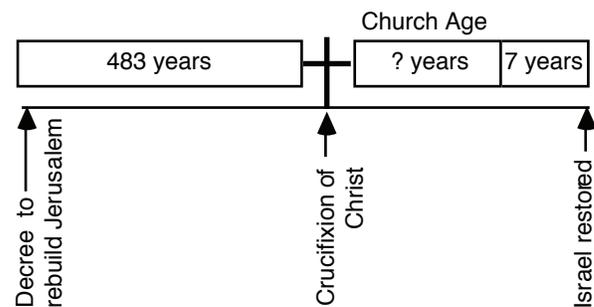
2. The Church Age

Many Christians do not understand where the Church fits in God's timetable. Many confuse the New Testament Church with the nation of Israel in the Old Testament. As a result, many bring Old Testament law and principles into the New Testament Church. This leads to great confusion and error.

It is very important that we see the clear distinction between the Church and Israel. The Bible clearly teaches us that the New Testament Church is a "mystery." (Eph. 3:1-11) This does not mean the Church is "mysterious." A "mystery" is truth that was hidden in God and is now revealed to man. (1 Cor. 2:7) In other words, it is something that God knew but held from man until His appointed time. Such is the Church!

The Old Testament prophets did not know about the Church. (1 Peter 1:10-12) We can look back now and see illustrations of the Church in the Old Testament, but the Church itself did not exist then and was unknown to the prophets. While the Old Testament clearly indicates that Gentile nations would come into blessing through the promised Messiah (Gen. 18:18; 22:18), the truth that Jews and Gentiles would be brought together, on an equal basis, in one new man in Christ was never revealed in the Old Testament. (Eph. 2:15; 3:5, 6)

The Old Testament prophets looked forward to Christ's reign in His kingdom on this earth. (The disciples of Jesus thought the time had come for Christ to set up His kingdom on the earth, with Israel being the center of blessing on the earth. [Acts 1:6]) The prophets were not given to see the Church Age in which we now live. It is a parenthesis in God's timetable with the nation of Israel whom He promised to restore in the land. (Ezek. 36-37).



In Daniel chapter 9, Daniel was informed of God's future dealings with the nation of Israel. He was told that 483 years (69 weeks of 7 years each) after the decree was given to rebuild the city of Jerusalem (Dan. 9:25; Neh. 2:1-8), the promised Messiah would be cut off (9:26). This was perfectly fulfilled in Christ when He was crucified. Daniel is also informed of another week (7 years) in which the nation of Israel will sign a covenant with a world leader, only to have him break it after half a week (three and a half years).

Christ referred to Daniel's prophecy and spoke of the tribulation that would come upon Israel in those last seven years and, in particular, of the "great tribulation" that shall come during the last three and a half years after the covenant is broken. (Matt 24:15-24) This period is known as "Jacob's trouble." (Jer. 30:7)

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Since Daniel's prophecy concerning the cutting off of the Messiah has taken place and his prophecy concerning the seven year tribulation period has not taken place, there must be a gap between the 69th week (483 years) and the beginning of the 70th week (484-490 years). This gap of unknown length in God's time table with Israel is known as the "Church Age." It is this period of which the Old Testament prophets had no knowledge.

During this age, Christ is building His Church just as He said He would (Matt. 16:18). The Gospel concerning God's Son, Jesus Christ, is being taken unto all nations, and each new believer, whether Jew or Gentile, is being added to the Church. (Acts 2:47)

The age is characterized by the fact that the Holy Spirit has been sent to earth by the glorified Christ to unite believers, both Jews and Gentiles, together into the body of Christ and to indwell each believer. (Acts 2:33; 1 Cor. 6:19; 12:13)

3. The Current Mission of the Church

In the period between its beginning on the day of Pentecost until it is raptured from the earth, the Church has a mission. It is not to settle down in this world and become like it. As Christ's body, it is to carry on the work which Christ began to "do and teach" nearly two thousand years ago. (Acts 1:1) It is to take the Gospel of Christ "to" the world (Mark 16:15-16) and to live the life of Christ "before" the world. (Matt. 5:16; Gal. 2:20) As citizens of heaven, we are ambassadors for Christ here on earth and would beseech the world to be "reconciled to God." God has made this possible through the death of His Son. (2 Cor. 5:20-21)

God's Word exhorts each believer to live a life of separation from the world, including its religion. The believer is to be growing in his likeness to Christ through the application of God's Word on a daily basis. (Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 3:18; 1 Pet. 2:2) The Christian's life is to be a "living letter" which is "known and read of all men" (2 Cor. 3:2), for many will read our life far more than they read the Bible.

4. The Functions Of The Local Church

And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

Acts 2:42

The Holy Spirit records for us in Scripture the activities of the early Church. Local assemblies of Christians gathered together for teaching (doctrine), breaking of bread, and prayer. They functioned as a "fellowship" or "partnership" in which each member contributed to the local church as enabled of the Lord. (Acts 4:32) They were not just a group of individuals coming together to be ministered to. They were working together as a team to carry on a testimony for Christ. (Phil. 1:27)

The local church's primary function was to build up and encourage the Christians. (Eph. 4:11-14) Nowhere does Scripture give us any indication, even remotely, that the church is to be made attractive to the unsaved world. As souls are saved and added to the church, they are built up in the faith so that they can contribute to the ministry (work) of the local church. The teaching of the apostles' doctrine—the Word of God—was a central activity in the early church. Sadly, today the Word of God is often given a low priority and has been replaced with many social activities and entertainment.

Christians in the early Church gathered on the first day of the week to remember the Lord Jesus in the breaking of bread. (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 11:23-32; 16:2) Here the purpose was not to "receive" from the Lord by way of teaching from the Word of God, but to "give" to the Lord the worship of which He is worthy. (Rev. 5:9-10) As those who had identified themselves with the rejected Christ, they gathered separate from the world to declare afresh that it was indeed the Lord Himself Who had died on the cross of Calvary. They gathered to bring Christ to mind and to give Him the spiritual sacrifice of praise. (Heb. 13:15) As they remembered Him in the breaking of bread, they did so in anticipation of His coming again. (1 Cor. 11:26)

The local churches also gathered for collective prayer. They prayed as an assembly, with their hearts united. (Acts 1:14; 4:24) It was not a matter of how many people prayed, but that they prayed "as one." How little we know of "collective prayer" today! Many churches make every effort to get as many people praying as possible, but very few make an effort to pray "as one." It is not the number of prayers, but the unity of prayer that gives power to the local church. Such was the case in the early church. (Acts 4:31)

Many today select the local church in which they will fellowship based on its social calendar, the preacher's personality, the programs offered, etc. Too many fail to consider the important elements of worship, teaching, prayer, and the partnership of the local assembly as taught in Scripture.

Today many see the local church as no more than a spiritual supermarket to which they go at their convenience to buy what they like and then leave. This "supermarket" concept of the Church is not what the Scriptures teach. The local assembly is to be a "partnership" into which each partner contributes what he or she can. It may be washing windows, cleaning the building, cutting the grass, giving financial support, working on a missionary project, distributing Gospel tracts, visiting the sick, teaching Sunday School, preaching, etc., but in every case, it is to be done as unto the Lord as a partner in the local church. (Col. 3:23)

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Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; Ephesians 5:25

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5. The Church's Destiny

Adam was alone in creation, and God gave him a wife as a suitable companion. Adam, as head over the human race, sinned, and the human race was condemned (Rom. 5:12, 18) However, God had plans for a Second Man, a Man from heaven, the Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor. 15:47) He would be head of a new order known in the Bible as "New Creation." (2 Cor. 5:17) However, the promised Ruler must first come as the Redeemer (Lk. 24:26), and give "Himself a ransom for all." (1 Tim. 2:5)

Just as Adam was unique in creation, so too is Christ in New Creation. And just as God gave Adam a suitable wife, He also gave Christ a suitable bride, the Church. (John 17:6) Being the bride of the glorified Christ, the Church is destined for heaven. (John 14:3)

The Church's blessings are heavenly. (Eph. 1:3; Col. 3:1-4; 1 Pet. 1:3-4) When the Lord is ready to take up the nation of Israel again (Rom. 11:24-25), Christ will come "for" the Church, and it will be "raptured" off the earth. (John 14:3; 1 Thess. 4:13-18) (While the word "rapture" is not in the Bible, the truth of the rapture is! The words "caught up" in 1 Thess. 4:17 mean to "snatch away with force." The English word "rapture" conveys this idea.) The Church will be "snatched out" of this world to "be forever with the Lord," and God will take up His dealings with Israel once again.

When God has judged the nation of Israel and the Gentile nations, Christ will return "with" His bride to establish His kingdom on the earth, and just as the first man's wife was with him in his rule, so shall the Church rule and reign with the Second Man, Jesus Christ. (Rev. 5:9-10; Col. 3:4; Matt. 24:29-31) The truth of our rule with Christ over the earth is to have its practical effect upon our lives now. (Col. 3:1-17)

We are to live now as those who will rule with Christ in that day.*

For further study we recommend the following books
Christ Loved The Church - William MacDonald
New Testament Church Government -
Kenneth Daughters

This article was originally written as a booklet for prison ministry and provided free of charge by Spread The Word to those working with prisoners, either directly or by mail. Assemblies and saints may also request free copies. Other available booklets may be seen at STW's web site. (Pg.2)

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October 13	2 Timothy	Bruce Hulshizer
November 10	Lessons from Joseph	Dan Weaver
December 8	Eternal Life & Eternal Punishment	Randy Amos
January 12	Romans 12-16	Tom Irwin
February 9	Lessons from Saul & David	Bob Spender
March 9	Feasts of Jehovah	Mike Attwood
April 13	Conference - John Gordon, TBA Held at North York Bible Chapel (PA)	
May 11	Assembly Fellowship & Assembly Discipline	Keith Keyser